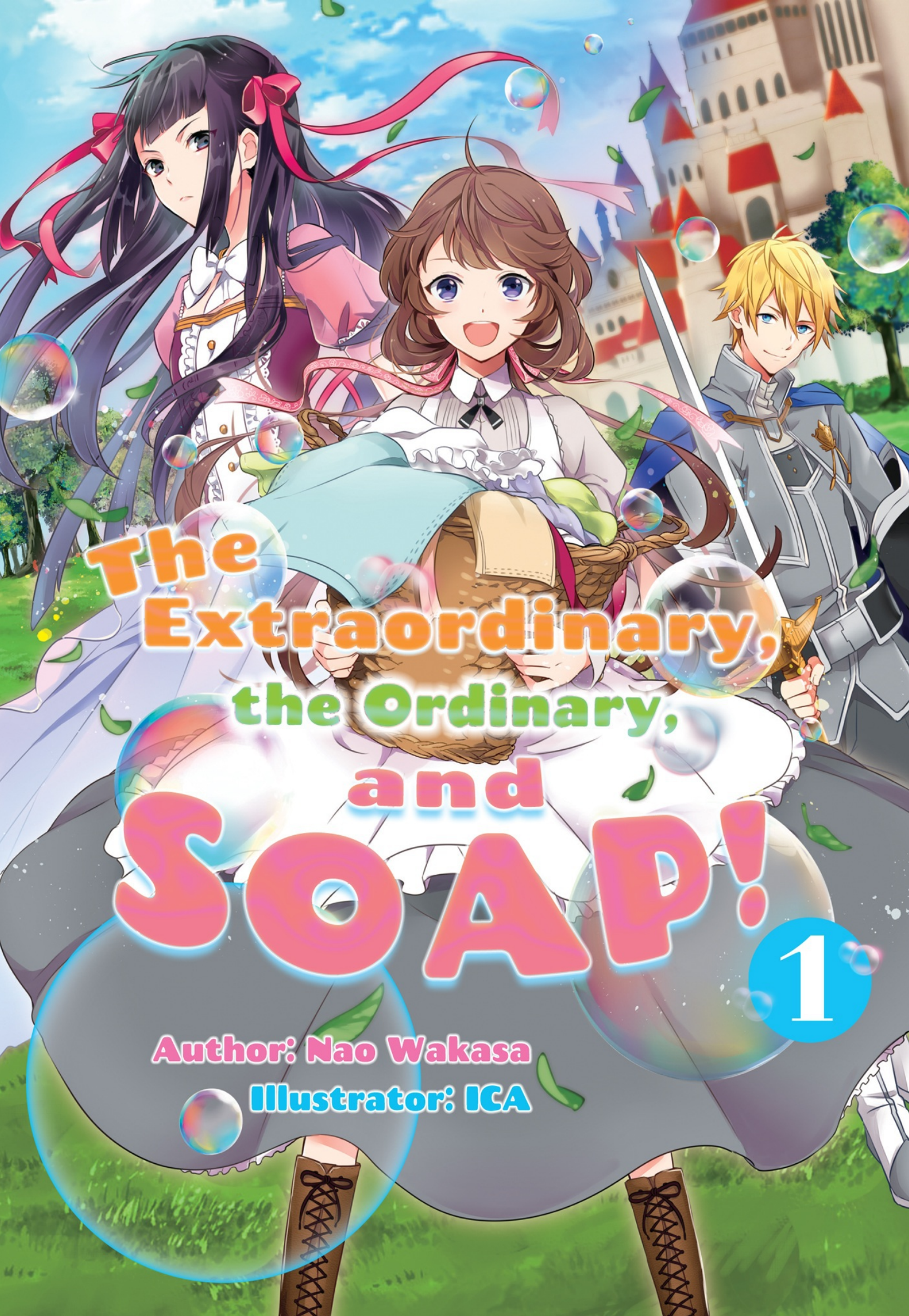




The Extraordinary, the Ordinary, and SOAP!

1

Author: Nao Wakasa

Illustrator: ICA

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**The
Extraordinary,
the Ordinary,
and
SOAP!**

1

Author: Nao Wakasa

Illustrator: ICA

**Celestino
Clementi**

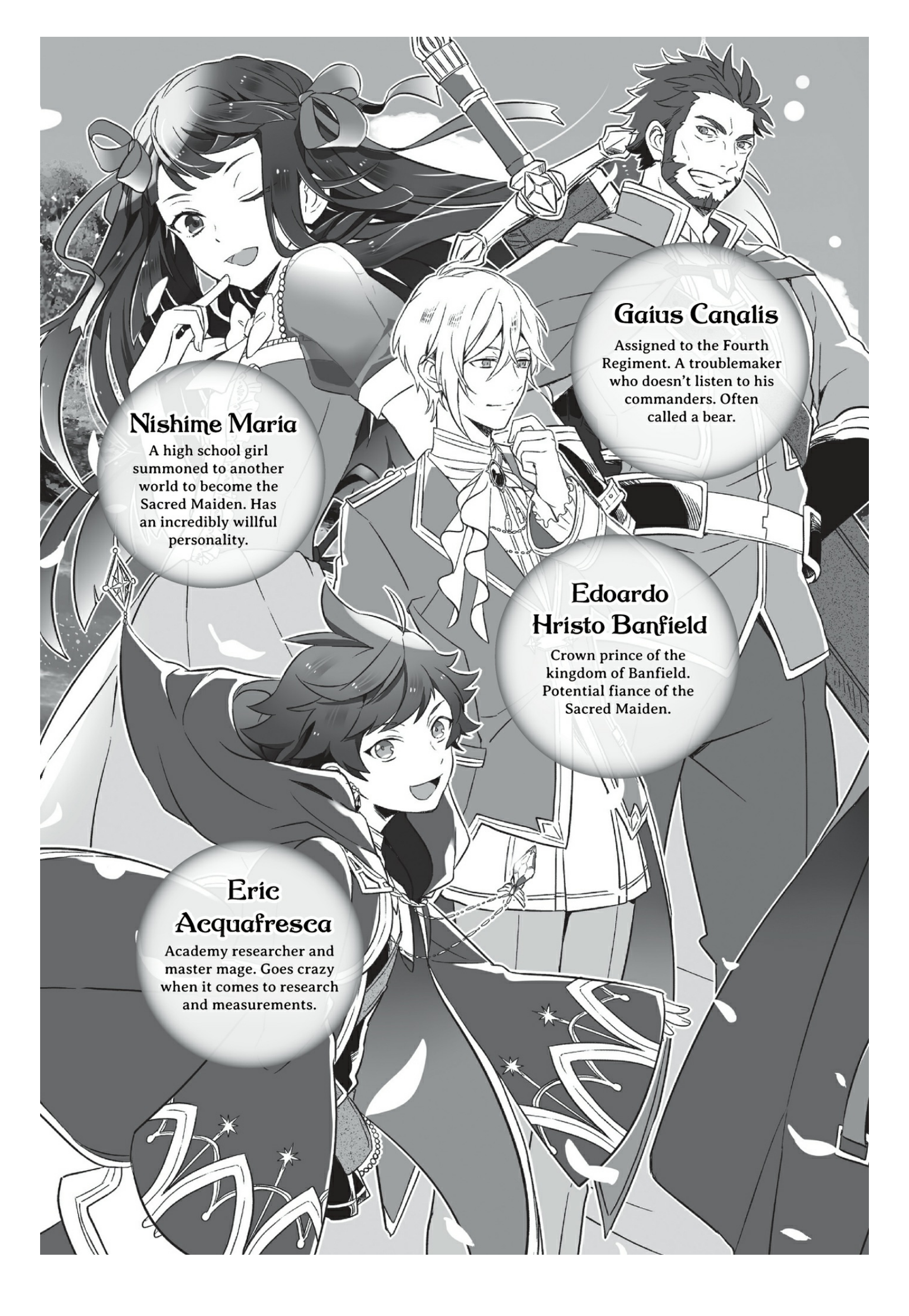
The famed Captain of the Third Regiment, known as the Dragonslayer. Despite his flashy looks, takes his responsibilities very seriously.

Lucia Area

By appearances, an ordinary laundrymaid. Earnest, good-natured, and hard-working. Has a special magic called "Soap."

CHARACTERS

The Extraordinary, the Ordinary,
and SOAP!



Nishime Maria

A high school girl summoned to another world to become the Sacred Maiden. Has an incredibly willful personality.

Gaius Canalis

Assigned to the Fourth Regiment. A troublemaker who doesn't listen to his commanders. Often called a bear.

Edoardo Hristo Banfield

Crown prince of the kingdom of Banfield. Potential fiancée of the Sacred Maiden.

Eric Acquafresca

Academy researcher and master mage. Goes crazy when it comes to research and measurements.

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Lucia Does the Laundry

“Oh the soap and the suds wash all the dirt away,

Leaving the shirts so nice and clean!

The sun is warm and bright today,

The perfect day to do laundry...!”

Today’s sky was a beautiful, clear blue — it really was perfect weather for doing the laundry. I rubbed the soap into the dirty clothes laid out on the washboard, then scrubbed them vigorously against the ridges to get the dirt out. Seeing one after the other turn clean and white was such a wonderful feeling!

Looking at the next piece of clothing, I sighed. “This one is going to need *Soap*, isn’t it?”

No one answered — I was working alone in the back courtyard of Arldat Castle. The uniform I held was covered with a massive blue stain, and no amount of hand washing was going to get that out. Under the bright sun, the blue stain had an oily feel to it, nothing like the clear blue sky overhead. Just one look told me that this wasn’t dye; something sticky and viscous had stained the uniform.

I focused on the stain. “*Soap!*”

At my incantation, a flurry of rainbow-colored soap bubbles floated up out of the stained uniform. The bubbles enveloped the stain, which faded as if they were drawing it into themselves. Then they floated up into the sky, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow. The stained uniform returned to its original crisp gray color. As the rainbow-sheened soap bubbles danced lightly under the blue sky, I couldn’t help but smile at their beauty. I never got tired of seeing this scene. I mean, it was just so *pretty*! That beloved blue sky, with my magic floating under it. As the soap bubbles drifted upwards, they sparkled in the

sunlight like jewels.

“Now I just need to hang these up to dry!”

The tub was piled high with freshly cleaned laundry. With a huff, I heaved it up, and then left the chilly washing area and set off for the sunny spot where the clotheslines were. Getting around the big castle while carrying a heavy laundry tub was no easy task.

Now, with your permission, I would like to introduce myself.

I am Lucia Arca, sixteen years old. My chestnut-colored hair reaches to my back, with a slight wave to it, and my eyes are a violet color so dark that they look black. My height is average, neither short nor tall. Likewise, I’m not exactly well-endowed or slender. At most, I’m maybe a little bit curvier in the chest than most. Even my face is unremarkable. Just an ordinary person wearing everyday clothing. That’s me, Lucia.

If my eye color were just a little lighter, then at least you could tell that they were violet! But at a glance, they just look black, which makes me feel even plainer.

When my only family, my mother, died a few months ago, I left my familiar home of Hasawes behind and set off to make a fresh start in the royal capital of Arldat. Thanks to an acquaintance, I’m now making use of my special talent, working as a laundrymaid in the castle!

Why would I do that, you ask? Well...I have debts to pay. Mostly from buying medicine for my mother. I’d done my best to ease the cost by gathering medicinal herbs on my own, even from far away. But even so, it was never quite enough. With my mother’s life on the line, we’d had no choice but to pay however we could, even if it meant going into debt. But now that she was gone, I was left with enough debts that even selling my childhood home wasn’t enough to repay them all. Which, well, led me to working as a live-in laundrymaid.

Even a commoner such as myself could get a job as a laundrymaid washing dirty clothes or a kitchen assistant helping the head cook. Of course, there was no way you could get a job as a servant in the royal castle without references. But in my case, one of my long-dead father’s acquaintances referred me. There

happened to be an opening for a laundrymaid! Laundry is hard work, so it's not a popular job even among the servants. So I was able to get a job.

Next step, to pay back those debts!

Ah yes, about that "special talent" I mentioned...

Have you ever heard of a magic called *Soap*? No? You haven't? Well, that's not too surprising. I've never heard of it anywhere else, either. It might seem incredibly special, that an ordinary person like myself has a magic that only I can use, but...it's not, really. My *Soap* is simply a magic that creates soap bubbles.

It's only good for children's games? Yes, when I was small I thought the same thing. *Soap* may be rather dull, but if I cast it on something dirty, then hey presto! The soap bubbles gather around the dirty part, no matter what it is, and clean it away. So it only makes sense that I would get a job as a laundrymaid, don't you think? So my days are full of laundry. It is tiring work, but it's very satisfying, so I actually enjoy it!

And now I'd reached the clotheslines. There were several places where you could wash clothes in the castle, but the back courtyard, which was in the sun most of the day, was the only place where you could hang them to dry. It was very large, because it was used not just by the laundrymaids attached to the knights, where I worked, but all the laundrymaids who worked on the regular laundry generated by daily life in the castle.

As an aside, the laundresses who worked for the royal family didn't use the courtyard, they used clotheslines on the castle roof. Unlike we servant laundrymaids, the maids who handled the royal family's clothes were lower-ranking attendants with references from noble families. So naturally, they used different washing places and clotheslines.

Now then, let's get these clothes onto the line!

The clothesline was strung a little higher than I was tall. Piece by piece, I draped the items from my heavily-laden tub over the line and secured them with clothespins. It was a clear day, with a breeze. They would surely dry in no time.

"And...finished!"

Right now, it was early spring, at the transition between the windy month of Ventose and the sprouting season of Germinal. Although there were still plenty of cold days, the sunlight was warm. I'd gotten cold washing the laundry in the shade, but I could feel myself warming up again — especially since hanging the laundry made for quite a bit of exercise. Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I picked up the empty laundry tub. Five fully loaded tubs' worth of laundry was now all on the line, flapping in the breeze. *Oh, that's satisfying!*

"Look at you, all hard at work, Lucia!"

"Chicca!"

When I turned around, my coworker Chicca had just arrived carrying her own fully loaded tub of laundry. Her sunburned face was bright with a sunny smile, while her sandy-colored hair coiled at the base of her neck. I always worked in the same place, but Chicca would change her washing location every day, so that she could gather all the latest news.

"I hate to ask you to do my job for me, but could you cast *Soap* on this? I got most of it out, but the rest of it is beyond me." Setting her tub on the ground, Chicca reached inside and pulled out one shirt.

Is that ink? The shirt had a black stain on it. It had already been thinned, but that did look challenging.

"Of course, it's no trouble at all! *Soap*!"

I focused my attention on the remaining stain and cast my magic. The dark spot vanished together with the rising soap bubbles, leaving a pure white shirt in Chicca's hands.

"Thanks! Sorry about that. That magic of yours is such a big help!" Pale blue eyes sparkling, Chicca thumped my shoulder.

Soap really was the perfect magic for a laundrymaid. Maybe my magic didn't have any other use, but professionally, it was incredibly popular among the laundrymaids who were in charge of the knights' laundry. So I tended to get requests like this a lot. The laundrymaids in charge of the royal family didn't have anything to do with us common-born servants, so they didn't know about it.

Setting the clean shirt aside — for some reason, my magic got rid of the water as well as the stains, so there was no need to line-dry items I'd cast *Soap* on — Chicca began hanging the other items in her tub on the line. My hands were free, since I'd already finished my load, so I went to help. In response, Chicca turned a warm, friendly smile towards me, laugh-lines crinkling the corners of her eyes.

"The first regiment always seems to have a lot of pigment stains," I commented, standing next to Chicca to secure a clothespin. "Did that happen again today?"

"Pretty much," Chicca agreed. "But it's better than dealing with the Handymen and their monster gore!"

The laundry that we dealt with had different kinds of stains. What I dealt with was mostly mud, but Chicca usually had stains from sauce, cosmetics, and also ink and pigments. Because Chicca was a thirty-year veteran, she had charge of the laundry of the First Regiment, the knights who acted as personal guards to the royal family of Banfield.

The knights of Banfield were organized into the First through Fifth Regiments. The First Regiment were the royal guards protecting the king and his family, the Second Regiment was the intelligence corps in charge of investigations and negotiations, the Third and Fourth Regiments were the mobile combat units, and the Fifth Regiment was the defense force charged with maintaining law and order in the capital. On top of that, there were regular soldiers serving under the knights, but the laundrymaids assigned to the knights' regiments were only responsible for the knights themselves, so we only did the laundry of the fifty knights assigned to each regiment. Because I was the most junior of the laundrymaids, I was normally in charge of the Fifth Regiment, whose laundry was usually the dirtiest. But since the mobile Third and Fourth Regiments — usually called the Handymen — sometimes went on monster hunts, when they came back I would switch over to them.

As Chicca had said, the gore from monsters was very troublesome. It simply would *not* wash out. I had no idea what that stuff was made of. Once that blue blood had stained something, regular soap was useless. Because of that, they used to throw the uniforms away, even though the uniforms of Banfield's

knightly regiments were specially enchanted by the mages of the Academy for magic resistance and physical defense. I'd heard that the knights of other kingdoms wore armor, but here in Banfield, the knights only needed to wear their uniforms. Given how special they were, it was best to reuse the uniforms if at all possible.

Thus, everyone was overjoyed when I became a laundrymaid and we discovered that with *Soap* I could clean the stains. So thanks to me, they've really managed to reduce the clean-up costs. My magic may be boring, but it's useful!

"Come to think of it...aren't you covering the Handymen today, Lucia?"

"I am. Apparently the Third Regiment went out on a monster hunt, so I'm doing the uniforms from that. Still, they actually weren't too bad this time. Although one of them was terribly stained."

"According to a friend of mine among the lower-ranked attendants, the Captain dealt with all the monsters himself this time. That's our Dragonslayer for you!"

Unlike we servants, the attendants who worked in the palace were mostly young noblewomen learning etiquette. In addition, although I'd never spoken with them, among their number were the daughters of wealthy commoners. In other words, the royal attendants were nobles, the lower-ranked attendants were upper-class commoners with references from noble families, and general servants like us were middle-class commoners or lower, more or less. Naturally, many of the lower-ranked attendants from common-born families gave themselves airs when it came to us servants, but others were willing to share gossip like this.

"In that case, the uniform I used *Soap* on earlier must have been his," I commented, thinking back to the blue-stained gray uniform.

I never bothered to check the names sewn into the uniforms every time I washed them, so I hadn't paid attention to whose uniform that had been, but given that only one person's uniform had been stained, it must have been the clothing of the famed hero, the Dragonslayer.

"Dragonslayer." That was the title given to Sir Celestino Clementi, Captain of

the Third Regiment. According to the stories, when the knights had set out to slay a dragon, he had been the one to deliver the finishing blow. It had been a massive expedition, made up of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Regiments. But dragons were powerful creatures, and the Third and Fourth Regiments had taken heavy casualties, while the Fifth Regiment had been almost entirely wiped out. As a result, the Fifth Regiment whose laundry I handled was a newly formed unit, made up of members drawn from among the soldiers. I wasn't entirely clear on the details though, as I hadn't been working here a year ago.

"Is that so? Oooh, if the other young girls heard that you got to lay hands on the clothing of the Dragonslayer, they'd go absolutely green with envy!"

Looking at the laundry waving in the breeze, I tilted my head to the side. "Really? But they're just clothes."

I could understand shrieking if you met the man in person, but...clothes are just clothes, right?

Chicca looked at me and sighed heavily, "And you a young girl yourself... Haven't you ever been in love?"

Chicca, don't look at me with such a sad face! I do actually have someone that I rather like, you know!

Lucia Has Lunch With Celes

We laundrymaids had a brief time off while we waited for the laundry to dry. We used that time to eat and attend to other business. But on a fine day like today, I had a particular place that I always went to. I picked up the lunch I'd gotten from the dining hall, wrapped in my own sky-blue napkin, and called, "Chicca, I'll return by the first afternoon bell."

Chicca, who had already turned to head for the dining hall, paused to give me a knowing smile and said, "Eating outside again, are we? It is fine weather, but...well, it must be love!"

"Love! That's— Uhh... Umm..."

"...the outdoors, I mean?"

"Oh! Yes! Yes, that's it! I totally love it! Being outside!"

"...We'll just leave it at that, shall we? Go on then. See you later."

Feeling Chicca's uncomfortably warm stare, I hastily snatched up my napkin-wrapped sandwiches and canteen of tea, and fled like a startled rabbit.



When I ran to the agreed spot in the back courtyard, the person I was looking for was already waiting under the tree.

"Sir Celes!"

"Lucia, you don't need to run like that! What if you tripped?"

Tousled golden hair the color of the sun, blue eyes the same color as the clear sky. Add in the intense expression on nicely symmetrical features, and any girl who was of age would fall head over heels in love with one glance. Then there was the flattering way that the knight's uniform fit his well-proportioned, tall figure. *Yes, once again Sir Celes is ridiculously dashing.*

But when he smiled, that intense look softened, and in those moments he looked adorable. Really, that had to be against the rules. Handsome *and*

occasionally cute? It meant that while Sir Celes was handsome, no doubt about that, he wasn't unapproachable or hard to talk to at all. He was a bright young man who loved to talk.

Talking with Sir Celes, the time simply flew by.

There was nothing pretentious about what we talked about. He'd talk about the dog his family had, or the time he'd gotten yelled at because he actually liked cats and was keeping one in secret, or interesting things that happened with his regiment. Simple things like that, where even I could go with the flow and just enjoy the conversation.

Surely this man had to be popular. I mean, he had both good looks and a good personality, right? He could be conscientious without becoming overbearing, and even though he was normally laid back, he could become forceful from time to time. Any girl's heart would be drawn to him! So surely there were many people who fell in love with him! Even I couldn't help thinking about it, and I really knew nothing about romance.

Oh, but for someone like me to want him to be with me? No, that would be far too presumptuous of me! We were friends, just friends.

Or...was claiming friendship too presumptuous, as well? After all, Sir Celes was a knight. Based on what I'd heard, he served with the Handymen — or rather, the Third Regiment. With the exception of the First Regiment, which only the noble-born could join, they were the most legendary of the knightly regiments. Sir Celes might laugh and claim that the work they did truly suited the nickname of "Handymen," but I still doubted you could join that regiment if you didn't have real strength.

It's hard to believe that such a person would be having lunch like this with a lowly laundrymaid like me, isn't it? I couldn't believe it myself, sometimes.

To explain... Our tradition of eating our lunches together first began when we met on a windy day three months ago. I had been running around the back courtyard, trying to chase down the laundry that had gone flying when I had taken the clothespins off. It was just one of the shirts worn under the uniform, but that still wasn't something you could just lose! It was just regular clothing, not like the jackets enchanted by the Academy, but even so, the material was

both comfortable and durable, and I suspect it was quite expensive. It was certainly a far cry from my flimsy personal clothes. So I had desperately chased after it. I'd been so focused on racing after it that, just as I finally caught it... I ran headlong into Sir Celes, who'd been standing under this tree.

Initially, Celes had simply stared wide-eyed at the laundrymaid who'd suddenly crashed into him, but when he saw my face, he'd looked even more startled. To the point that it surprised me. What Sir Celes said to me then was, "You— You're that soap bubble girl, aren't you!?"

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. I mean, I had no memory of meeting such a bright, handsome man. When he explained, however, I remembered. He and I had actually met once before. Sir Celes had been on his way back from a monster hunt.

To be honest, I only vaguely remembered that I cast Soap on a group of people wearing blue-stained uniforms that I happened to meet. But Sir Celes, who had a very good memory, had remembered my face. That was how he and I had become friends who ate our lunches together like this, on days with good weather. At first, I thought I couldn't possibly dare to sit and talk to a knight! But Sir Celes went so far as to say he'd come looking for me if I didn't come, and threatened me with a bright smile until I started calling him by name. And before I realized it...we'd become the sort of friends who talked to each other without any reservations.

"Lucia? Is something wrong? You're just staring into space..."

I suddenly realized I hadn't even unwrapped my napkin. "Oh! I was just remembering..."

"Remembering?" Sir Celes peered at me, a worried look on his lovely face. "Are you tired? Would you like to lie down?"

"Nonono! I'm fine! I'm perfectly healthy!"

Sir Celes was a worrywart. If I didn't refuse, he was the sort of person who'd even offer his lap for a pillow — which he and his handsome face had done before, the cheater! So I hastily denied his suggestion with all my might.

“Come to think of it...you’re in the Third Regiment, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.”

As we talked, I unpacked my food. Today, I was having potato salad sandwiches for lunch, while Sir Celes had a sandwich overflowing with meat. They were both sandwiches, but still completely different, from the contents to the bread. All that meat... I was a little jealous.

Oh yes! According to Sir Celes, the knightly regiments, who had to keep their bodies strong, often had meat as a main dish in their meals. *Oh, I’d love to eat more meat...*

The meat aside... As I bit into my sandwich, I turned to ask Sir Celes, who was taking a drink of tea, about something I’d been thinking about since my earlier conversation with Chicca.

“So... What sort of person is the Dragonslayer?”

The moment the words left my mouth, Sir Celes choked, the tea he’d been drinking spraying everywhere.

What was that about? I rubbed Sir Celes’s back as he coughed. “Are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah. Sorry, I’m fine. But what prompted that, all of a sudden?” he asked, eyes watering.

I’m sorry, that was such bad timing! I should have waited until after he finished drinking the tea.

“I was washing the Third Regiment’s uniforms earlier. When I heard that the Dragonslayer handled all the monsters himself on this expedition... I just wondered what sort of person he was.”

I’d heard that the Captain of the Third Regiment, the Dragonslayer, was popular with all the ladies, young and old, common and noble. But I only knew the rumors. I couldn’t really call myself well-informed. He was strong, he was handsome, he was serious, he’d been born a commoner... That was about all that I knew about him. I wasn’t really knowledgeable about the rumor mill, so someone like Chicca’s friend, the lesser attendant, would probably know more.

“What sort of person...” Sir Celes seemed to think about my question a bit, then smiled slightly. “He’s...an ordinary person.”

“‘Ordinary’?”

His eyelashes, rather long for a man’s, gleamed brightly in the sunlight. “Yes. He doesn’t have any particular hobbies, he likes to take things easy, he’s not so good at flashy stuff.”

“I never would have guessed...” Going by Sir Celes’s description, he sounded much like me. But of course, one was a laundrymaid, the other the Captain of a regiment of knights, and the powerful hero who had finished off a dragon. We were nothing alike.

“He’s the same as you, Lucia,” Sir Celes said, a hint of loneliness in his voice. “After all, he’s human.”

“...I suppose you’re right. We’re both human, aren’t we.” I nodded, and Sir Celes’s face immediately lit up with a bright smile. He really did respect his captain, didn’t he? Although, goodness, “human” certainly covered a broad category!



We continued our idle conversation as we ate our lunches, until Sir Celes unexpectedly went silent. He looked like he was pondering something. Without thinking, I asked, “Is something wrong?”

At my question, Sir Celes turned to me, his expression solemn. “Well, have you heard? About the Sacred Maiden.”

The Sacred Maiden. That was a topic that everyone in the castle had been talking about recently. At Sir Celes’s words, I thought back to the rumors that Chicca had shared with me, and nodded. “Yes. They say that she is a lady who came to us all the way from another world, and that she’s very beautiful.”

To explain the Sacred Maiden, I first need to explain a bit about this world.

Our world is comprised of five countries. First is the kingdom of Banfield, where we lived, followed by the kingdom of Dal Canto, the duchy of Vatis, the duchy of Aquilania, and the duchy of Galiena. Banfield is located in the center, with Aquilania to the northeast, Galiena to the east, Vatis to the south, and Dal Canto to the southwest. Although technically there are five countries, the kingdom of Banfield is overwhelmingly the most powerful, and the four smaller countries are effectively Banfield’s vassals. I would say that of those, only the kingdom of Dal Canto, which has the Tower of Learning dedicated to research and study, really has much influence.

And at the heart of our world are three sacred, mysterious trees made of crystal — the Cristallo Sacro.

The three trees are the Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest in Banfield; Cristallo Sacro of Foristarn in Vatis; and Cristallo Sacro of Maynard in Dal Canto. These Cristallo Sacro trees distributed all the magic in the world, and at the same time were the mothers of all monsters. According to the old stories, the gods planted the trees with their own hands when they created the world, to serve as supports for it. No one knows why such blessed trees would give birth to monsters that hurt people.

Well, even though we call them monsters, they weren’t all that different from normal animals, so until now it hadn’t really been a problem. But for the past hundred years or so, the monsters born from the Cristallo Sacro suddenly had become much stronger, and started to attack humans. Around the time when I

was born, they'd become even worse, to the point that humans could no longer handle them.

Take the dragon that the Dragonslayer slew. That's a good example. The fire-breathing dragons see humans as their enemies, and periodically they attack human settlements, burning many people to death.

Troubled, our king called the rulers of the various kingdoms to Banfield, and they learned that approximately six hundred years ago, a similar phenomenon had happened. Something strange happened to the Cristallo Sacro, and the world was saved by the power of a Sacred Maiden who came to us from another world.

That's right — the Sacred Maiden currently living in the castle was a blessed person, once again summoned from another world to purify the Cristallo Sacro. Her name was Lady Maria Nishime. She was no older than I, but a far greater beauty than I could ever hope to be.

Lucia Exchanges Tokens With Celes

“What of the Sacred Maiden?” I asked.

“Well, she’s finally completed her training, and soon she’ll be setting out to purify the Cristallo Sacro.”

“Truly!?” What happy news!

...Or so I thought, but Sir Celes’s face was glum. “What’s wrong?”

His shoulders slumped. “Well...it seems that I’ll have to go with the expedition.”

At his words, I hung my head. If he was setting out, then we wouldn’t see each other for a while, would we? No, I mean, I’m sure that being chosen to be part of the journey of purification is incredible, right!? Just as one might expect from a member of the Third Regiment, formed of the strongest knights. But the thought of not being able to see him in the meantime... Yes, that did make me feel lonely.

“I’ll miss you...” I let the words slip out without thinking, and Sir Celes whipped his head around to look at me. *Doesn’t that hurt your neck? Are you all right?* “Ah, um, that is... Take care, and come back safe and sound!”

Sir Celes grabbed my hands, which were still holding my sandwich. “Yes, I will come back!” he declared fiercely.

He definitely had a knight’s powerful grip. Ow.

After a few moments, Sir Celes released my hands. With a hint of hesitation in his voice, he said, “So, um... I was wondering, if you’d be okay with it, would you lend me your ribbon, as a token?”

At that utterly unexpected request, I set my sandwich down on my napkin and touched a hand to the ribbon I used to tie my hair back. “This? But it’s just a cheap little thing. Can something like this really be a token?”

It wasn’t silk, just simple cotton. It didn’t even have a design — it was just a

plain, slightly faded violet.

“It can!”

“Well then, I have a new one in my room, I can give you that...”

“Ah, but *this* is the one I want!”

Since he was insisting so seriously, I pulled my ribbon loose. Once it slipped free, I straightened out the creases, folded it, and handed it to Sir Celes. Now that I looked at it again, it really was worn and frayed. Did he really want this one? It was so battered and old, I felt a little embarrassed. But apparently Sir Celes really was satisfied with it.

“Thank you! With this, I’ll work twice as hard!” With a smile that shone like the sun, he held my ribbon as if it were something precious. A handsome man’s full-faced smile was not to be taken lightly! To get a smile like that for a single ribbon... Never underestimate the power of good looks! It was far too dazzling.

As he went to tuck the ribbon into the pocket of his uniform, Sir Celes said, “Ah, that’s right! I have something I wanted to give you, as well.” From the same pocket, he pulled out a small package. “This is hand cream. Someone gave it to me, but I don’t use flower-scented creams. I’d like it if you could take it.”

The cute little package, wrapped with a pale pink ribbon, came from Lily Blitz, a very popular store at the moment. I’d never seen one myself, but the logo on the packaging clearly displayed the name of the shop.

“Is this a Lily Blitz?”

“Yeah. They said it’s pretty popular with girls. So I thought you might like it.”

So I wasn’t mistaken. It really was a Lily Blitz. *Wow! I’ve never seen one before.*

Apparently, Lily Blitz was a popular cosmetics shop in the capital, with their flower-scented hand creams being their most popular product. I couldn’t say that I wasn’t interested — I’d heard rumors of the cream, but it was incredibly hard to acquire — but...

“I can’t accept this,” I said, pushing away the offered package.

Sir Celes stared at me with a look of utter shock. “Eh? Why not!?” he

demanded, flustered.

“You said it was a gift, didn’t you? It’s not right to give a present away to someone else.” If they’d gifted him something from Lily Blitz, then the giver was probably a woman. There was no doubt she’d put her heart into it. “If a present I gave you were gifted to someone else, I would be very hurt, Sir Celes.”

“That would only happen over my dead body!”

I was tempted, but I had to resist. After all, it was a gift from another girl... Sir Celes was a handsome knight, so surely there were many people who’d fallen for him, and there would be many young ladies who gave him gifts like this.

Odd. For some reason...I feel incredibly depressed.

Over hand cream? Certainly, my hands were very chapped, so I would love to accept it, but restraining myself shouldn’t be that hard.

“It would be rude to the girl who gave it to you,” I said firmly.

“Girl?” Sir Celes looked startled. Why? “It wasn’t a girl! I... That is, a member of my regiment is a son of the Blitz family, I got it from him.”

“A man gave you this?”

“Gave... Oh, yes, it’s from a guy! So you don’t need to worry about it, Lucia. Please, accept it!”

While I was gaping at the unexpected information, Sir Celes took my slack hands and wrapped my fingers around the Lily Blitz package. Atop the package resting in my hands, the pink ribbon ruffled in the breeze. Amazing. Even the ribbon was cute! No wonder their goods were so popular!

I gave in to greed.

“I understand. Thank you, Sir Celes! It’s wonderful!”

“Thank goodness...” At my thanks, a relieved smile drifted across Sir Celes’s face. It was as bright as the Lily Blitz itself.

“So I suppose we’ve traded, a ribbon for hand cream!”

“Traded!?”

...Hadn’t we?

Was it my imagination, or did Sir Celes look suddenly crestfallen? Peering at his slumped form, I suddenly realized something, and paled. Now that I thought about it, calling this a “trade” was undoubtedly rude! There was nothing equivalent about my ribbon and the Lily Blitz hand cream! The exchange wasn’t on the same level at all. One was an unused and very popular product, while the other was a worn-out, threadbare ribbon. To phrase it that way, when it was practically like the difference between Sir Celes and myself!

“I’m sorry! That was very forward of me!”

“It’s fine! Really, Lucia, you don’t need to worry about it! Yeah, come to think of it, it is like a trade! You’re right!”

“You think so? Still, I really am sorry.”

When I lowered my head apologetically, the wind caught at my unbound hair, whipping it about. Without a ribbon to hold it back, it was a bit inconvenient. A ribbon... Oh! Come to think of it, the Lily Blitz box had a ribbon. It looked like it was better quality than my old one, even. It was a charming pink, with a pattern of transparent flowers. I undid the ribbon from the package, then finger-combed my hair back together and tied it back. *There!*

“Um, would it be all right if I tried the hand cream?” I asked Sir Celes.

He had been watching me with a slightly troubled expression, but at my question, his smile immediately returned. “Please do!”

Well in that case... I opened the wrapping paper. Inside was a round tin with the logo of Lily Blitz and the image of a pink flower on it. When I opened it, I immediately smelled the sweet scent of flowers. *It’s so cute! And what a lovely smell!*

“Oh!”

At my exclamation, Sir Celes looked down, pressing a hand against his face. Noticing, I asked, “Is something wrong?”

“No... I’m just glad you like it.”

“...?”

I scooped up a bit of the cream inside and spread it onto my hands. It spread

better than I'd expected. Unlike the cheap creams I had been using, it didn't leave my hands feeling greasy, and once it had soaked in and vanished, it really did leave my skin smooth and soft. And it smelled so wonderful! Utter bliss!

"This is amazing!" Ah! I really should share this happiness with Sir Celes. After all, it had been gifted to him originally. "Here, Sir Celes — you too!"

"...!" I took Sir Celes's hands and spread the cream over both of them. His hands were hard and callused from swordwork. "I'm...very happy, too," Sir Celes said in a cheerful-sounding voice, as I spread the cream and massaged it in.

Oh, so he'd had the same reaction as me! The smell was so lovely, you couldn't help but smile. Lily Blitz was amazing. Even men enjoyed the scent. No wonder it was popular.

"I'll treasure this!"

"So will I."

We both laughed.

Lucia Says Goodbye to Celes

“So, when will you set out?”

At my question, the bright smile that had graced Sir Celes’s face faded. Looking glum again, he sighed as he replied, “In half a month... I’ll be busy making preparations, so I won’t be able to come here for a while. Sorry, Lucia.”

When he became dejected, the dashing and handsome Sir Celes somehow became cute and dashing. Although the “dashing” part never changed, no matter what his expression. I had no idea how he did that. He was just always handsome. I would never manage that, no matter what I tried, not with my plain looks.

But if he was that dejected about it, then could I take that to mean that he enjoyed our time together as well? I wasn’t the only one looking forward to it, then? If that was so, then I would be elated. So truly, truly happy. Which made not being able to see him even more lonely. I mean, I always enjoyed this time we spent together so much.

“How long will it take?” I asked.

Sir Celes sighed again. “Who knows... We’ll be guarding the Sacred Maiden as we travel to purify the Cristallo Sacro, so I suspect it will take a while. To get to the Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest, it takes about seven days on horseback, if you take the back roads. But the Sacred Maiden has never ridden on a horse or in a carriage, and we’ll be traveling along the main roads, so I have no idea how long it will be...”

These days, your options for traveling were to go either on foot or horseback, or by carriage. With monsters so prevalent in the last hundred years, the number of carriages traveling between cities had diminished. At this point, there were no civilian carriages at all. However, the kingdom did send out carriages on occasion. There weren’t many, but people could move about by riding with merchants or the kingdom’s carriages. The kingdom’s carriages were protected by magical stones created by the students of the Academy, and were

also protected by soldiers as they traveled, so they kept the cities connected. When I had come from Hasawes to Arldat, I'd used one of those kingdom-owned carriages. Apparently the royalty and nobility would hire guards and travel using their own carriages, but of course, that wasn't an option for we common-born folk.

But, the Sacred Maiden from another world had never ridden in a carriage before? Perhaps she had lived in a way that didn't require her to travel. Or maybe she'd used some other means of transportation. I would never have the opportunity to meet her, of course — but if I did, it would be interesting to ask. Although, a common-born person like myself had no business asking idle questions of such an august lady, anyway.

“They'll be announcing this publicly tomorrow, but His Highness the crown prince will travel with us. So we'll be traveling by carriage, but that means we won't cover much ground each day. I suspect it will take six months, or a year...maybe even longer than that before we return to the capital.”

“That long!?”

“Yeah... I would like to come back sooner, but the purification of the Cristallo Sacro is vital.”

A whole year... It seemed like such a long time to go without seeing him, but once the Cristallo Sacro were purified, the rampaging monsters would be contained and the world would be at peace again. Put in those terms, a single year seemed like the very near future indeed.

“I wish you luck on your journey, Sir Celes. Travel safely.” Praying that my beloved friend would be safe, I lowered my head deeply.

In response, Sir Celes thumped his uniformed chest once and gave me a brilliant smile. “I promise, I'll come back to you. And then we'll meet here again,” he swore.

I couldn't help but be happy at that promise.



“Welcome back, Lucia!”

When I returned to the laundrymaids' break room at the ringing of the first afternoon bell, Chicca, the Second Regiment's laundrymaid Rossella, and the sisters Jeanne and Joanne, who were in charge of the Third and Fourth Regiment, were all there.

"Aaaah! Lucia!"

"That's not the ribbon you had this morning!"

Feminine eyes were quick to notice feminine changes. Jeanne and Joanne were twin sisters, four years older than me. They were kind and beautiful, and they'd taken good care of me ever since I joined the laundrymaids assigned to the knights.

"So where did this come from?"

"It's so cute! You're always wearing cool colors like indigo and blue, but this sort of warm pink really does suit you, Lucia!"

The two sisters, who'd circled behind me to inspect the ribbon, rested their hands on my shoulders, identical faces drawing close on either side of me.

"So, was it a present from your boyfriend?"

"Boyfr— No! Don't be ridiculous!"

Honestly! Hearing it put like that, I found myself blushing. I mean, Sir Celes was a man and he was my friend, but we weren't lovers! We were just friends who ate lunch together! Nothing more than that!

"Lucia?"

"Come now, be honest with us. Is this from your lunchtime fellow?"

Jeanne and Joanne chuckled as I flailed. Oooh, with them holding my shoulders I couldn't get away even if I tried! Those cute faces were turning into villainous grins! Meanwhile, the older Chicca and Rossella were simply looking on from the other side of the room with great interest. Clearly, they weren't about to help me.

"Well, it was a gift — but it's not like that!"

This was a ribbon from Lily Blitz, and while it was certainly finer quality than

my usual ribbons, it wasn't meant to be a hair ribbon at all! The whole thing was a little awkward, so I'd meant to keep it to myself — but there was no denying those two. Resistance was futile. In the end, I had to explain what had happened during lunch. When I pulled the tin out of my pocket to show them, the twins shrieked in delight.

“Eeee!”

“Lily Blitz!?”

“My, but that's remarkable!” Chicca said, her eyes wide.

Even the normally taciturn Rossella commented. “...Amazing.”

Lily Blitz really was incredibly popular!

“So, he wasn't certain what to do with it, so he gave it to me. This ribbon was just tied around the Lily Blitz package.” When I explained that I was just wearing the wrapping ribbon until I could get back to my room, since I'd given away my usual one, the sisters looked at each other.

“A Lily Blitz ribbon?”

“This?”

With those surprised comments, they held up the tail ends of the ribbon, which had been dangling under my chestnut-brown hair. Well, it made sense that they would be surprised. After all, you'd never expect such an elaborately decorated ribbon to be used for packaging! But in fact, it was my turn to be surprised.

“This...is a regular ribbon,” Rossella said, lightly touching the pink ribbon and its transparent little flowers. “I bought one for my daughter's birthday. One small silver piece.”

For a small silver piece, you could buy a splendid lunch! You could even buy dinner, if you went somewhere cheap! I never would have thought this ribbon could be so expensive — that was a far cry from my cheap ribbon that I'd bought for a single copper coin!

“That's right! Lily Blitz's ribbons are a basic pink!”

“Besides, you'd never use a fancy ribbon like that for packaging!”

Put that way, I did have to agree. After all, it was incredibly cute.

As I was gaping, I heard Chicca murmur, “He must have deliberately switched the ribbon.”

Hearing that, I suddenly panicked. Eh? He’d put that much thought into it!? Maybe it would be better if I returned it? Oh, now I was getting worried about it!

“I’ll go return it! The ribbon, at least!” I pulled the ribbon out of my hair and went to turn around, but Jeanne and Joanne hastily stopped me.

“Now, now, none of that.”

“That’s definitely a ribbon meant for a girl,” Joanne added. “And is your fellow’s hair long enough to use a ribbon? If not, then he must have gotten it specifically to give to you.”

Prompted by Joanne’s words, I pictured Sir Celes. His hair was long enough to shade his eyes and brush his collar, but it wasn’t long enough to tie with a ribbon. *Then...Sir Celes got this for me?*

“It compliments you quite well, Lucia. He must pay very close attention.” Rossella’s words were the finishing blow. I turned as red as a boiled tomato. For a moment, my heart skipped a few beats.

Because— I mean— It never occurred to me that he’d gotten that ribbon for me! It was so very pretty! Oh, what should I do, I was so incredibly happy... *Would it be all right if I danced around the room?* What were his intentions in giving it to me? I wanted to ask, and at the same time, I was terrified of asking.

But even if I wanted to thank him, it would be quite a while until I saw him again. We’d promised to meet again, but I had no idea when that would be... When I remembered that I couldn’t meet him, my giddy feelings withered away as though I’d been dunked in cold water. A year was far too long. I missed him already.

“Are you going to get him something in return?”

“You said he was a knight, yes? From the Third Regiment? Maybe you could invite him to visit the town for the next holiday... Lucia, what’s wrong?”

At their words, I shook my head dejectedly. “He’s being sent with the Sacred Maiden on the purification expedition. So I won’t see him for a while. Maybe a year or more.”

“What!? You mean he’s just leaving this hanging with no way to move forward? What’s with that!”

“I suppose it’s hard for him, too. Maybe he wanted to leave a mark, so other guys will know she’s taken!”

While the twins were talking, Chicca stepped past them, smiling, and held out a hand.

“Here, Lucia, hand me the ribbon. I’ll fix your hair for you.”

While Chicca gently tied the ribbon in my hair again, I thought about Sir Celes. In my heart, I promised myself: I would thank him without fail when he returned.

So please, Sir Celes — come home soon!

Side Story: Celestino Explains How They Met

I only met her by chance.

One year ago, the knights of Banfield learned that a dragon was rampaging in the neighboring duchy of Aquilania.

Aquilania was by far the smallest of the five kingdoms. The dragon had already overrun half of the kingdom's territory, and the Aquilanian knights were crushed. With no other options, they'd sent a message asking for the help of Banfield and her knights. Aware of Banfield's responsibilities as suzerain of the five kingdoms, the king immediately sent orders to the captains to dispatch a force to slay the dragon.

Normally, monster-slaying duties fell to the Third Regiment I commanded and the Fourth Regiment, led by Captain Baldato. However, because we would be facing a rampaging dragon this time, the Fifth Regiment, which normally was charged with maintaining law and order in the capital, also joined our expedition. In addition, the Academy of Magic, which trained mages and conducted magical research, sent a unit of mages to join our force as well. We were an elite force, the pride of our kingdom.

I never imagined, when we set out, that we might fail.

Our expedition rode for Aquilania under the command of Vice-Commander Verdage, but...a dragon was truly nothing like the monsters we were used to.

Against that unimaginable power, the Fifth Regiment was the first to break. Next were the mages. Their magic was powerful, but after their mana ran out, the dragon killed them with a single sweep of its tail. We so-called "Handymen" were all that remained. With Vice-Commander Verdage in command, we continued to fight, but...Captain Baldato of the Fourth Regiment and Vice-Commander Verdage died together in the wounded dragon's last flames.

That I survived was a matter of pure luck.

Dazed and covered with wounds, I staggered to the dragon and finished it off. But once the battle was over, none of us could move. No one in the Third or Fourth regiments was unscathed. We'd taken heavy casualties, including among the soldiers who served with us.

We were said to be the strongest of the knights. And we'd come to *this*.

Our uniforms still covered with the dragon's blood, we set out for home, stricken by the dragon's terrible might and our own powerlessness. We crossed the border. Passed through a few villages. Then one day, as we were listlessly preparing for camp near the town of Hasawes, we met a young woman carrying a bundle of herbs.

"What's wrong?" she — *Lucia* — had asked. She wasn't afraid at all, despite our haggard appearance. "Are you all right? Um...if you like, I could at least clean your clothes for you? Oh, and these herbs, you can make them into a tea that will help you recover your strength. Would you like some?"

At first, I had no idea what she was even talking about. Clothes? Yes, the blue-stained uniforms were an eyesore, but you couldn't wash the stains out. Every time we got monster gore on ourselves, we had to throw the uniforms away — much to the displeasure of Lord Canalis, who was the aide-de-camp in charge of the regimental budgets.

"Thank you, but this won't wash out," I told her curtly.

Lucia met my gruffness with a gentle smile. "That won't be a problem," she said. "Watch this. *Soap!*"

With that, Lucia used a strange magic I had never seen before. I jumped in surprise as soap bubbles suddenly surrounded me — and then realized that my blue-stained uniform had reverted to its original gray.

And not just that. The cloud of despair that had been hanging over my thoughts had also vanished. Could this have been an effect of that magic, too?

I didn't know. But there was now no sign of the dark feelings that had been weighing me down. With my head suddenly cleared, I blinked in disbelief, actually *looking* at the girl standing in front of me.

Even though she was out in an area where monsters ran rampant, her gear

was shockingly light. I could see the hilt of a knife peeking out of the bag slung over her shoulder, but she didn't have a single piece of armor.

Maybe she's a magician? I wondered. But normally, in order to use magic one needed a crystal to channel the magic of the Cristallo Sacro. As far as I could tell, she wasn't carrying one.

To look at her, she was an ordinary town girl. Put her in any city street, and she would blend right in.

And what was that magic? I'd never seen nor heard of anything like it. It wasn't healing magic. But it wasn't protective magic, either. What kind of magic cleaned stains from clothing and also cleared the mind? None of this made any sense.

"What do you think?" Lucia asked, tilting her head a little to the side.

With a start, I focused again. "It...worked..."

If this magic cleanses not only our clothes but also our minds...

At that thought, I asked her to use her magic on the others. If she could wipe away that despair, I was ready to crawl on the ground and beg. We were knights. If we were going to do our duty and defend the people, we couldn't afford to let our spirits stay broken. If we faced monsters traumatized and thinking that we might not be able to win, then we would be of no more use than blunt swords.

Lucia agreed easily, casting her magic on each of the members of our group in turn. Even as the blue vanished from their uniforms, color and expression returned to each of their faces. It hadn't been my imagination, then; her magic truly did clear the heart.

"Thank you... You've saved us."

Lucia looked a little tired, but her smile never faltered as she pressed part of her bundle of herbs into my hands. "Thank goodness! It's not much, but take these. If this isn't enough, they grow wild a little farther away, so feel free to gather more. And now, I really have to go back, so if you will excuse me... Good luck in your travels, Sir Knight!"

She gathered up her remaining herbs, and left.

The Soap Bubble Saint. That was what the survivors who'd felt her magic called her.

It was an odd title, combining the reverence due to a sacred maiden with the impact of the soap bubbles, but something about the whimsy of it seemed to suit her. An extraordinary power, hidden away in a form that seemed utterly ordinary.

Who *was* she? But by the time I thought to ask her name, she was already gone.

It was about a year before I met Lucia again.

When we returned, we were met by cheering crowds. I in particular was lauded as "the Dragonslayer." I couldn't stand it. Yes, I had slain the dragon, but I hadn't done it alone. Everyone should have been acclaimed as heroes, those of us who'd returned as well of those who hadn't.

But when I appealed to the Knight Commander, he scolded me. Allowing the people to lionize me as Dragonslayer raised their hearts and improved morale, he said. So I held my tongue and let them call me that.

The feast to celebrate our victory was bittersweet for those of us being celebrated. But thanks to Lucia's cleansing, it was *just* bittersweet.

When the feasting was over, we set about reforming the regiments. We had to choose a new vice-commander, as well as new captains for the Fourth and Fifth Regiments. On top of that, we had to reform the Fifth Regiment from scratch. That meant selecting new knights from among the soldiers, training them, and equipping them. We also had to recruit new soldiers to replace those we'd lost. All of that took a lot of time, but we eventually finished.

A few months later, while I was meandering idly through one of the less popular back courtyards, I met Lucia chasing after a piece of laundry.

Side Story: Celestino Chooses a Gift

When I met Lucia again, I discovered she was a sweet, sunny, optimistic girl. There was nothing extravagant about her looks or behavior, and she had a warm, gentle air that made me relax when I was with her.

I wanted to get to know her as Celestino, not “the Dragonslayer,” so I only introduced myself with my nickname, Celes. I did wonder if even that would give me away, but I wanted her to call me by my name, not a made-up one. Lucia, with her innocent honesty, didn’t make the connection between “Celes” and Celestino Clementi, and just gave me the same warm smile that she had before.

Being with her seemed to wash away all my weariness. Unlike the noisy crowds of noble ladies in the palace who were drawn by my rank or looks, Lucia simply cared about me. Her kind words were like pure water soaking into my heart.

At first, she’d been carefully formal, due to my status as a knight. But I managed to ease her concerns, until we were close enough that when the weather was clear, we would spend our lunchtimes together. Not bad, if I do say so myself.

Apparently, her mother had died sometime after we met. Left without any other living relatives, Lucia had sold her childhood home to pay back the debts she’d incurred caring for her mother, and come to the castle to work as a laundrymaid.

“I’m so lucky! I mean, I managed to get a position as a live-in laundrymaid. And in the castle, no less! Isn’t that amazing?” Lucia laughed.

There wasn’t even a hint of shadow in her smile. She was honestly rejoicing in her good fortune, so much that to my eyes she practically glowed with it. Even though her mother had died, and she’d lost her old life in order to pay back her debts, Lucia never looked back. Would I have been able to smile like that, in her position? I doubted it.

“I just love these clear days. The laundry dries well, and I get to spend time with you, Sir Celes.”

I don't think there's a man in the world who *wouldn't* fall in love if the person he was interested in said something so sweet to him.

Yes. I was in love with Lucia.

When I was with her, I could just be myself. Not “Captain Celestino Clementi,” but just “Celes.”

People were often misled by my flashy good looks. But on the inside, I was a regular, boring person, really. I didn't have any great interests, or special talents. I was a regular knight from a family of commoners: good with a sword, handy with magic, strong, but no more than that.

Ever since I'd killed that dragon and gotten saddled with the title “Dragonslayer,” it had gotten even worse.

I'd gotten so tired of wearing the mask of someone who had it all together — as the commander of the Third Regiment, and as a knight who protected the kingdom and its people. People who treated me like a normal person, people like Lucia, were hard to come by.

The days when I hadn't even cared if it was cloudy or clear were over. Now I was simply a fool in love, waiting impatiently for the sun to shine.

Then my happy bubble burst when Sir Agliardi pulled me aside one day.

Knight Commander Fernando Agliardi was the leader of all the knights of Banfield, and a man I deeply respected. The king and crown prince apparently both thought very highly of him as well, and frequently had him at their side.

“Captain Clementi, I imagine you've heard about the purification expedition?” he asked.

I had heard that not long ago, the five kingdoms and the mages of the Academy had worked together to summon the Sacred Maiden from another world. Until now, the maiden — Maria — had been cloistered in the Academy,

learning about our world and training to control her purifying light.

“She’ll be setting out soon,” Commander Agliardi told me. “This is still confidential information, but it appears that you, I, Lord Reynard, and a mage from the Academy will be her primary escorts.”

“Me, sir?”

“Well, naturally the Dragonslayer is needed in the party. Both for your combat skills, and as a symbol.”

In that moment, the only thing that went through my head was, *But then I won’t be able to see Lucia*. I really had become a fool for love.

Commander Agliardi continued, “It appears they’re running into some problems choosing attendants for the Sacred Maiden, but the plan is to make the announcement in three days at the latest. We’ll set out half a month after that. Good?”

I could hardly say no. The world needed this purification. It was only a matter of time before monsters attacked the kingdom of Banfield directly. And if the monster in question were a dragon, I didn’t think that our still-recovering knights and the Academy would be able to hold out.

If I wanted a future with Lucia, then I had to fight for it.

When I realized I would be leaving Lucia, I thought of giving her a gift. But, I’d never given anything to a woman before. I couldn’t think of anything to give her. What would be appropriate? Jewelry or something?

As I mulled the problem over in the regimental office, someone behind me cried, “You don’t give jewelry to a woman you’re not actively courting!”

I jumped, wondering if I’d accidentally spoken out loud — but apparently the words weren’t directed at me.

“That’s what hand cream is for, my good fellow!” the speaker continued.

“Wait, hand cream? Not perfume?”

The conversation was between two members of my regiment. The fellow recommending the hand cream was Fedele Blitz, to a skeptical Jeremiah Ascari.

They were both veterans of the regiment, who had participated in the dragon hunt a year ago.

“Lily Blitz’s hand creams are very popular with the ladies! Surely you know that, Jeremiah?”

“Oi, Fedele. I’m single, I don’t even have a girlfriend. How would I know what people think of a shop like that?”

“Ah, truly a tragic story. Poor thing.”

“What was that!?” Stung, Ascari started up out of his chair.

Blitz held up a hand to stop him. “Now then, ladies have preferences when it comes to jewelry and perfume! But with the hand cream, even if the scent isn’t perfect, they still have something practical to use. In other words, you won’t accidentally give her something she doesn’t like. You see my point?”

“How’s that different from perfume? They’re both smelly,” Ascari asked.

“But they’re not the same,” Blitz corrected. “A perfume should surround a person, to let them make a stronger impression, yes? A hand cream’s scent is much fainter. It’s meant to relax the person using it, to improve their mood, to smooth their skin. In short, it makes a lovely gift!”

He was right! Lucia was a laundrymaid. Given how hard her job was on her hands, hand cream would be the perfect gift for her.

Lily Blitz, was it? That’s right, Blitz is from a merchant family. They run that store. Still reviewing my knowledge of my subordinates in my head, I stealthily continued to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“And now, just for you... Ta-dah!” From seemingly nowhere, Blitz produced a small package neatly tied with a ribbon and showed it to Ascari. “Here we are, Lily Blitz’s prized, most popular item, hand cream! It’s a little pricey, though. Three small silvers!”

“...Is that the only scent it comes in?”

“No? This flower-scented type is the most popular, but there are also fruit-scented kinds...”

“Fruity is better.”

“Oh, come on! I figured you’d want this one, I didn’t bring any of the fruit type!” Blitz pleaded. “This kind is by far and away the most popular, *and* it’s hard to get. Do you have any idea how much trouble it was to get this one?”

“Then work on your sales pitch, you merchant!”

“I am a knight!”

Listening to Blitz’s words, I pictured Lucia. *Flowers or fruit...* Somehow, I thought flowers would suit Lucia better.

“Well then, when I ask her out, maybe we’ll swing by Lily Blitz,” Ascari said.

“Oh-ho, making a move, are we? It’s high time you showed some courage. Well, if you take my recommendation, she will certainly enjoy it. Although, if you visit the store, then you really should look at the cosmetics...”

“Oh come on, you pushy peddler!”

“It’s a cosmetics store! Those are our primary wares!”

“You are such a merchant...”

Sighing with disappointment, Blitz moved to return the package to his pocket.

“Blitz. If you don’t have any use for it, could I buy it?”

...Saying those words took every bit of courage in my body.

In my quarters in the bachelors’ dorm for the knights, I stared at the present I’d acquired, and fretted.

Once we left on the purification expedition, we would be gone for a long time. I couldn’t be sure that someone else wouldn’t notice Lucia during that time. If, say, one of the other survivors of the dragon-slaying expedition were to meet her, it was possible that they’d fall for her just as hard as I had. Given that, I really wanted to give her something to wear, something visible.

And...I wanted something of Lucia’s, to carry with me as a token. Men with wives or lovers would often tuck something from their ladies into their pockets whenever setting out on a monster hunt. I’d never really paid much attention before, but now I understood how they felt.

Something of Lucia's... A handkerchief, maybe? No...if possible, I really wanted something a little more personal.

As I was thinking, my eyes fell on the ribbon tied around the package. Come to think of it, Lucia always had her hair tied back with a ribbon. If she were willing, borrowing that would be perfect.

But if I take her ribbon, her hair would get in her way. So I can give her a ribbon as well.

Decision made, I left my room.

Ultimately, I was able to get her to accept the gift. She very nearly turned it down, but overall, I thought it had gone very well indeed. And Lucia had even held my hands! I was so very lucky. Thank goodness I had put the effort in.

Her hands were much smaller than mine, with slender, delicate fingers. Yes, they were chapped enough that you could see the roughness, but that was because she worked hard. I found them far more beautiful than the prettily manicured, white hands of noble ladies. I suspect she had no idea how hard it was to let go.

I also succeeded in acquiring something of hers as a token for my journey: her hair ribbon, the same violet color that her eyes were when the sunlight caught them.

It was strange. When I put the ribbon into my pocket, somehow I felt as though Lucia herself was walking beside me. No wonder the other men wanted to carry something from their wives and lovers. Suddenly, I felt as though I truly understood where they were coming from.

Also, Lucia was so *cute* with her hair loose.

Normally, she wore it tied in a ponytail so that it wouldn't get in the way as she worked. Seeing it fall loose from her usual ponytail with a soft, pleasant smell of soap... Well, to be honest, it was a little bit awkward. That was much too dangerous. I didn't want her to do that in front of any other man. She was just too vulnerable like that.

And yes, I was the one who'd asked her to take her ribbon out in the first

place, but still!

She'd also used the ribbon I'd wrapped around her gift in place of the ribbon that she'd given me. Even though I'd planned from the beginning for her to notice it, I'd been a little nervous when she picked up the ribbon of her own accord. But as I'd hoped, the ribbon looked adorable on her. I was so glad I'd drummed up the courage.

Reflecting on the happiness Lucia had given me, I found myself thinking, *What do I do? I'm almost too happy. I feel like I'm going to pay for it in the future, somehow.*

...Which led me to the present moment. Because apparently, my worries had been on target.

"I'm sick of this! I don't want to see your faces anymore! Stay away from Ed and Celes, you!"

"But, Sacred Maiden, that wasn't our intent at all! We just wanted to see if His Highness wished for a change of clothes, and if Sir Celestino would like the fraying in his uniform mended..."

"What, so I'm supposed to stay quiet while you go cozying up to them!? Oh, you're all eyesores! We had an agreement! I save your world, and you make sure I live in comfort! I agreed to give up on going home and save you lot, so be grateful and stop making me uncomfortable!"

We'd completed the rituals praying for victory and set out for the Cristallo Sacro, but the purification expedition was already falling apart.

The culprits were the black-haired girl shrieking at the attendants, and, unfortunately, His Highness the crown prince.

Prince Edoardo was so infatuated with the Sacred Maiden, he humored her tantrums as charming willfulness. Not only did he humor her, he went out of his way to grant her whatever she wanted. Even now, Prince Edoardo was speaking with Commander Agliardi about something. Almost certainly, it was about the attendants. Poor things. They hadn't actually done anything wrong.

Still. Did His Highness have a fondness for pushy women, then? Honestly, just

watching her verbally lay into people was scary enough. Personally, I would never be able to handle her.

For His Highness to see the Sacred Maiden as charming, he had to be a truly tolerant person. I suppose that was our crown prince for you. Just to emphasize again, that was far beyond me.

So of course, once she'd railed at the attendants, the Sacred Maiden came straight to my side.

"Celes, why don't you come over here? I'll sew that for you. I might not look like it, but I'm very good at sewing." She stared up through her lashes with large, glistening eyes, not a trace of her earlier menace to be seen. She looked sweet and charming, someone to be protected at all costs.

She clearly knew exactly what her weapons were, and wasn't afraid to show them. I had to fight the urge to back away. I was out of my depth when it came to two-faced women like this.

"You are Prince Edoardo's fiancée, my lady. It would be inappropriate for me to approach you. The fraying doesn't concern me, so..."



“Oh, but I’m only a *potential* fiancée, you know? If our journey doesn’t succeed, I can’t marry Ed. But...”

Her slender hands clutched at my arm. Unlike Lucia’s, her fingers were smooth, as if they’d never worked in cold water. Her red lips curved in a sweet bow-like arch. With an expression that was a strange mix of innocence and seductiveness, she murmured in a low voice, so only I could hear, “I don’t know if I can be the crown princess. It’s scary. I’d rather have you, Celes, to stay by my side and protect me, you know...?”

I could feel Prince Edoardo’s stare burning into me from where he stood talking to the Commander.

Your highness, this is a misunderstanding! I already have my heart set on someone! Even if she doesn’t reciprocate!

As I thought. Too much happiness and the universe takes revenge.

I miss Lucia so much right now.

Lucia Worries About Celes

The day after I said goodbye to Sir Celes, the news that the Sacred Maiden would be setting out on her journey to purify the Cristallo Sacro reached the servants. Apparently, the Sacred Maiden would go forth in the company of the crown prince, Knight Commander Agliardi, the commander's aide-de-camp, the Dragonslayer, and a fire mage from the Academy.

Of course, there were others besides them — a number of regular knights like Sir Celes, many soldiers, and attendants as well, so ultimately it was quite a large expedition.

In that case, they're sure to make it home safely. I breathed a little sigh of relief. *Please, please keep them safe. Let them not encounter any dragons. That's all I ask.*

Half a month later, the day of Sir Celes's departure came at last.

The town that morning was filled with a festival atmosphere among all the people who had gathered to see off the expedition as the crown prince and the Sacred Maiden led the way out.

But, I had work to do, so I wasn't able to see them off.

Clutching the laundry, I looked up at the brilliant, clear blue sky, picturing Sir Celes on the road.

I don't care if he doesn't become a great hero. Gods, please let me meet that gentle man again. Please let him come home safe, and unhurt.

Listening to the cheering voices that I could hear carried on the wind, I rested my hands for a moment and stared up into the blue sky, the same blue as Sir Celes's eyes.



It happened five days after the Sacred Maiden and her entourage departed.

It was raining that day. On rainy days, we used indoor washrooms and drying racks. Today we were washing the sheets, so everyone hiked up their skirts and stomped on the laundry to agitate it, chatting as we worked. Although Rossella, who generally didn't say much, just listened to us with a smile, as usual.

"I do wish we could do these large things on sunny days, though!"

"It can't be helped. It's been raining for a while."

"But they always end up musty. Ugh."

"They do! Musty sheets are a laundrymaid's shame! But if the sun is going to be shy, then there's nothing we can do about it."

The indoor drying rooms were quite spacious, but even so, there wasn't enough room to hang all the sheets. We did our best to speed up the process by ironing them before they dried, but we still had to split the load and do multiple washings.

If I used *Soap*, it would be done quickly, but Chicca had decided that, outside of stains that we couldn't get out any other way, it wouldn't be good for us to depend on my magic. So we did the laundry the normal way.

"All right, girls, just a bit more now!" Chicca encouraged us. "Once these are hung we'll have lunch."

"Whew... Is it finally lunchtime?"

"I've gotten hungry," I agreed.

"I wonder what the menu is today," Joanne mused. "It's a little chilly, so soup would be nice. Even if we're working hard, it's cold in here!"

At Chicca's words, we all sped up. We wrung the water out of the cleaned sheets, passed the hissing iron over them, and draped them over the lines. If we'd been outside we wouldn't have needed to bother with the iron... That was one of the disadvantages of drying indoors.

"Done at last!"

"At least using the iron warms you up a bit."

"Even if it's just a charcoal fire, having a source of heat makes everything feel

warmer. I think I'll be fine now even without the soup," Joanne agreed, having apparently given up on her earlier preference. And certainly, with the charcoal fire and the steam rising up from the laundry, it was starting to get a little hot.

"I'll get the window."

"Oh, please do, Rossella!" Chicca agreed.

With Chicca's permission, Rossella opened the window slightly, just enough to let a little air in without allowing blown-in rain to dampen the drying sheets.

"Well, now that that's done, shall we go find something to eat?" Chicca suggested, and we all followed her to the servants' dining hall.

Within the palace, there were a number of dining areas, meant for the officials, the knights, the attendants, the servants... Even though we all worked in the same place, we had different statuses, and that was reflected in the food. For example, who got to eat meat.

"Oh, it is soup today!"

"How about that, Joanne?"

"Oh, the wheat grains are even a little chewy, this is delicious!"

"It looks warm. Ah, and it smells wonderful. It's true what they say — hard work makes the best spice!"

The menu for the day was a wheat and potato soup, along with tough black bread and a little bit of cheese. Once we'd picked up our lunch trays and found an empty table corner to sit at, we settled in and started eating.

"Say, did you hear?" a man sitting at the same table asked Chicca.

"Well, that was sudden. About what?" she asked.

I didn't recognize him, but perhaps he was one of Chicca's acquaintances, because they fell into conversation easily. Listening, I broke off pieces of my black bread and used them to help sop up the soup as I ate.

Then I heard something utterly unexpected.

"Seems that the folks who left with the Sacred Maiden have come back. Everyone but the Commander and his aide, the Academy mage, and the

Dragonslayer.”

“*What!?*” I yelped.

Because, that meant Sir Celes had come back, right!? I’d resigned myself to him being gone for a whole year, so it was even more of a shock.

But, they only just left, so why...?

“Heh! I’m surprised you’re so surprised, miss!” the man said, shoulders shaking with laughter. Apparently, my reaction had been very funny.

I was still frozen with surprise. Chicca ignored me and continued the conversation. “Why would they do that?”

“Well...just between you and me, seems that the attendants were sent back by the Sacred Maiden, while the prince sent the men home.”

“Sending them back here makes no sense,” Chicca huffed. “What’s a small group like that supposed to do if they meet a dragon on the road or something?”

“How should I know? But according to a soldier friend of mine, the attendants were sent back because the Sacred Maiden threw an absolute fit complaining about them. Something about them making eyes at His Highness and the Dragonslayer or somesuch.”

“So the Sacred Maiden has a temper, has she? What about the knights and soldiers, then?”

“Well, the prince gave the orders, and he didn’t bother to explain himself. Still, I agree, it makes no sense,” the man said. “What’s the point of sending all your fighting forces back?”

“But why would Commander Agliardi accept that? Even if it were the prince’s orders, shouldn’t he have objected, as the head of the knights?”

“Who knows what goes through the heads of the high and mighty.” At the man’s words, he and Chicca both grimaced.

Also listening to the conversation, Jeanne and Joanne both turned to me eagerly.

“But this is wonderful for you, Lucia!”

“That’s right! Are you going to go see your friend now? Come to think of it, what was his name? You mentioned before that he was with the Third Regiment, but I don’t think we ever asked his name.”

Well, yes, to be honest I did want to go see him right away, but... I shook my head, cursing the weather. On rainy days, I couldn’t meet him no matter how much I wanted to.

“No, I won’t go today. It’s raining. Sir Celes and I agreed that we would only meet when the weather was good.”

At my answer, the twins’ eyes went wide.

“...Sir Celes?”

“His name is Sir Celes??”

And then...

“Everyone!”

Bernedetta dashed into the dining hall, her face deathly pale.

She did the laundry for the palace administrators. Being a fellow laundrymaid, sometimes she would come talk to those of us assigned to the knights, but for all her love of talking, she wasn’t the sort of person to run about shouting.

“What’s wrong?” someone near the entrance asked.

Bernedetta didn’t even try to hide her panting — she must have run all the way here. Even so, she replied in a voice that rang throughout the entire dining hall.

“Monsters... Monsters are coming towards Arldat!”

Lucia in the Monster Attack

For one moment, stunned silence followed Bernedetta's declaration. Then, with a clatter of wood, the screams and shouting started.

"We, we have to run away!"

"Out of the way! I'm outta here!"

"Why now!? The Sacred Maiden only just left us!"

"Commander Agliardi and the Dragonslayer are both gone — can the knights handle this without them!?"

"Most of the knights and soldiers left with the Sacred Maiden! There's no hope!"

"No, wait, I heard the soldiers had come back!"

Surrounded on all sides by the voices of all those people, I scrambled to my feet.

What do I do?

Monsters had never attacked Arldat before. Somehow, we'd all simply assumed that we would be safe living in the capital. The news that we weren't triggered panic in everyone.

I found myself thinking of the duchy of Aquilania. Rumor said that they were still struggling to recover from the ravages of the dragon's rampage last year. Now, the Knight Commander Agliardi and the Dragonslayer were away. If our attacker was another dragon, then Banfield might meet the same fate as Aquilania.

I don't want to die, not before I see Sir Celes again! I want to welcome him home, and thank him for the ribbon! I pressed my hands over my pounding heart and looked to Chicca and the others.

"Bernedetta, do we know anything about the monsters?" Chicca demanded. Her clear voice rang through the chaos of the dining hall.

“Eh...? Oh...give me a moment...” Still white-faced, Bernedetta pressed a hand to her temple. “I-I think they said it was a horde of ogres and ogresses. They said, a large number had been seen, and the Third and Fourth regiments were gathering the soldiers and preparing for battle!”

Ogres... Screams erupted all around.

They were fearsome monsters. Everyone said that they had a particular fondness for the taste of human flesh. I’d also heard that they weren’t particularly bright, but none of us knew how to fight. Which meant they were a real threat. Perhaps that was why everyone surged as one for the exit, when they heard that name.

I didn’t want to die either. I liked to *eat* meat, I didn’t want to *be* meat! But, I couldn’t make up my mind. What would be safer? Running away, or staying behind the castle walls?

A voice cut through the rising panic. “Everyone, calm yourselves! You will be safest in Arldat! We will be closing the gates and preparing the catapults. Those of you with family in the city, bring them to the castle! These are the orders of Vice-Commander Astorga, who defends the city in the Commander’s absence!”

The speaker was a soldier clad in dark gray armor. A message runner, perhaps? He’d pitched his voice to carry over the hubbub of the crowd, even as he tried to calm everyone.

“Sorry, Lucia,” Chicca said. “I need to go find my relatives!”

“Lucia, stay in the castle. We’ll all be right back!” Jeanne added.

“We’ll see you soon, Lucia! Come on, Jeanne. We need to find our parents!”

“It will be fine, Lucia. The knights will protect us. I’ll see you later.”

Chicca and the others all had family who lived in town. With hasty goodbyes, they set off running to find their relatives and evacuate them to the castle. I didn’t have any family, and I lived in the bachelorettes’ dorms in the castle. I could only see them off, shaking.

I’m so scared. What should I do? This is terrifying!

Although monsters ran rampant in our world, I’d been lucky enough to never

experience an attack in person. When I'd gone outside the town walls to gather herbs, I'd known it was dangerous, but even then I never encountered any monsters. So at some level, I'd thought of it as something that happened to other people. It was scary, but surely it would never happen to me.

But, this was reality.

Fortunately, Sir Celes and the other knights and soldiers who'd left with the purification expedition had returned to us. Surely they would handle this. Could it be that the Sacred Maiden and His Highness had anticipated this, and that was why they had sent the soldiers back? If so, they truly were amazing.

It'll be all right. It'll be all right, I told myself, over and over.

I wanted to run away, I was so scared — but Sir Celes was in Arl-dat now. He was a knight. The Third and Fourth regiments were the best of the best, and they did so much. Surely they had many strong knights among their numbers. And Sir Celes was one of them. He would protect us, right?

We would be all right. Sir Celes had even once told me that he was strong enough to win against the monster that had killed my father. If Sir Celes was here, we would be fine. I believed in him.

Biting my lip, I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath. First things first. I had to calm down. And then I would think about what I could do!

That was the beginning of the nightmare.

Lucia Searches for Something to Do

When you're confused, start with what you can do.

My mother told me that when I was small. When you didn't know where to start, just handle things one at a time, and it would all work out, she'd said.

Well then, what can I do now? What I needed to do was survive. To that end, I was probably best off following the instructions of the professionals. At the very least, that would be better than trusting my own amateur judgment. The knights and soldiers knew what they were doing when it came to monsters.

Where should we run? Was there a place we could go where we wouldn't be in the way? Surely they were evacuating the people of the town to the castle because it was easier to protect people who were in a group, rather than scattered everywhere. They probably had things they would like us ordinary people to do.

I called out to the soldier, who'd waded into the crowd and was directing people, "Where should people who can't fight evacuate to? Or is there something that we should do?"

"Noncombatants, you mean? We're gathering the civilians in the ballroom, so go there!"

As I thought, they were gathering everyone in one place. I certainly would feel better if I were with everyone else, rather than alone.

Together with everyone else who had received the same instructions, I headed for the ballroom.

The ballroom was a dazzling place, used to host balls and other such events. On top of the extravagant design, it would normally have been filled with beautiful music and nobles dressed in all their finery.

But terror ruled the day today. Instead of music, it was filled with the cries of children, and voices that were shaking with fear. The terrified people didn't even look around them, even though normally they would never be permitted

to enter a place like this. They simply wrapped their arms around their loved ones, waiting for the crisis to pass.

Among those people, I stood completely alone. I didn't have anyone to help me through this. I huddled up against a wall covered with pictures of seasonal flowers and wrapped my arms around myself.

I was scared. Was I going to die like this? If I thought of it as being able to go to where my mother and father were, it didn't seem quite so bad, but I was still scared of dying.

I don't want to die.

I'd promised my mother that I would live enough for her portion, and my father's. She'd be angry if I broke that promise, right? And I'd promised Sir Celes, too — that we would meet in the back courtyard again.

I missed him. I missed him so much.

I didn't want to be alone.

I was scared! I was so, so scared...

My thoughts were chasing themselves in circles. *Mother, what should I do? Where should I start? I obeyed instructions and went to the ballroom. What should I do next to get through this?*

Trying to find something I could do, I looked around.

They must have let us in here because the ballroom was big enough to hold a large crowd of people. After all, they could hardly let ordinary commoners go running around in the inner palace, where the royal family lived. Because of the rain, they couldn't send us to the courtyards. And there were too many people in the capital to split us up into private rooms, even if we shared.

But the ballroom was supposed to be a place for entertainment. It even had a balcony leading off of it, where people could go to enjoy the night breeze and the beautifully tended gardens.

There was an open space in front of the large glass doors leading to the gardens. No one wanted to be there, not when there was only fragile glass between them and what was outside. The doors were perfectly clean and

polished. Since there was no one in the way, I could see the thin lines of water from the light rain running down the glass from where I huddled.

Which was why we noticed so quickly.

“Hey, what’s that!?”

“Dragons!?”

I wasn’t sure who noticed them first. Visible against the low-hanging gray clouds, two winged shapes were flapping steadily closer.

“Those are...rocs!” an elderly man screamed, and that was enough to set off the same kind of panic I had seen in the dining hall.

Rocs were massive, white, bird-like monsters. They were so huge that they’d been known to carry off people and horses, even cattle, as their prey.

Ogres and ogresses could be stopped by the castle walls, and driven away with thrown weapons and bows. But none of that was any good against an attack from the sky!

In a single moment, we were all overwhelmed with terror.

One roc peeled away, as if aiming for a different target. But the other came flying straight towards us, as if mocking our useless terror.

“I don’t wanna die!”

“Mommyyyyy!”

The hall was filled with screams and shouting. In a great surge, everyone rushed to the exit.

I wanted to run too, but my legs wouldn’t obey me. And I’d made the mistake of putting myself next to the wall. The sheer force of people rushing past pushed me back until I couldn’t even move.

“Everyone! Please remain calm! The castle is protected by the Academy’s barrier. Even if they get through, the knights can handle a roc. Calm yourselves!” the guard shouted.

“Get out of the way, we have to run!”

“I’m not gonna die here!”

“That hurts! Get off me!”

The hall had descended into complete chaos.

I’m scared. I’m so scared!

Even though I kept trying to tell myself that we would be all right, the moment I actually saw the monsters, I simply froze. As if pinned in place, I could only stare outside, not even able to look away. My heartbeat was so loud, it felt as though my heart had moved into my ears.

Help me, Sir Celes! I’m scared! Please, come!

The roc was right before my eyes now. Seeing us, it dove straight for us.

Wham! Before it reached us, something threw it back.

“The roc... Ah! The Academy’s magic!”

“But how do we know it won’t break!?”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine! The barrier will protect us!”

As people shouted back and forth, outside the window the roc threw itself at us again and again, as if furious at being stopped.

They’d said it was a barrier made by the Academy, so we should be safe...right? Unable to join the people fleeing the hall, I clung to the wall, trembling as I watched the roc claw at the window glass.

Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!

I don’t know how many times it took, but suddenly the sound of the roc’s attacks changed. There was a strange noise, like the thin ice of early winter breaking, like the crash of water, like glass shattering.

What was... I started to wonder.

With a thunderous crash, the window glass broke. The roc’s sharp talons dug deep gouges into the polished floor of the ballroom, glass shards showering down around them.

“.....!”

So it was true. When people were truly frightened, they couldn’t even

scream. I hadn't known that. I would have been happy to live my entire life *not* knowing that!

Paralyzed with terror, I sank limply to the floor. There was no strength in my legs. I couldn't do anything but shake like a leaf.

As if dissatisfied with only clawing at the floor, the roc withdrew its talons, only to throw itself against the window again.

What is it... I started to think.

With a crash of shattering wood, the window frame broke, and the roc's fearsome beak crashed through.

Sir Celes, Sir Celes, Sir Celes! Frozen, I could only scream the name over and over in my mind, like a prayer. Without that, I would have been too terrified to even breathe. Death was right in front of my eyes.

I saw the guard who had been guarding the hall, the one who'd tried to calm everyone earlier, slashed down. Screaming, everyone ran like frightened rabbits. I saw them rushing to the exit, trying to get out.

I had to run. I knew that. But my body wouldn't move.

The roc's massive eye appeared right in front of me. With a tiny squeak, I stared as if mesmerized at the monster in front of me. All I could hear was the breath in my lungs and the pounding of my heart.

I'm scared.

I'm so scared.

This is a dream, right? Please, someone, tell me this is a dream.

I have to wake up. I don't want to be this scared!

I'd decided to live a long life, long enough for my mother and father as well. I'd promised my mother. I couldn't die here!

With an ear-splitting cry that felt like an attack of its own, the roc turned towards me and raised its terrible talons. They swept down at me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I used the only power I had. It wasn't as if soap bubbles would actually do anything to a monster, but it was the only thing I had

left.

“S...Soap!”



Lucia Makes a Choice

For some reason, rather than spreading out in a drifting cloud as they always had, the soap bubbles that appeared came together to form one gigantic bubble. A bubble that enveloped the roc.

I stared at the monster, unable even to blink. *What is this? What's going on?*

The razor-sharp talons that had been slashing down at me...stopped in midair.

After a moment, the roc lowered them to the floor. As it did, it made a soft sound, almost like a coo. Its voice was incongruously relaxed, nothing like the murderous screeches a moment ago.

I blinked. *What...just happened?* My heart was still pounding painfully in my chest. In sharp contrast, the roc looked completely at ease, as if it had completely forgotten that it was attacking us.

"Wind Wall!"

"Ice Rain!"

"Wind Arrow!"

A storm of magic spells flew at the roc's back. Blades of wind and spears of ice sliced into the roc's body from all directions. The roc shrieked as blue blood flew everywhere. When I craned my neck to see what was going on, I saw three mages wearing the deep green uniforms of the Academy glaring at the roc, hands gripping the crystal pendants lying over their robes.

"E-Everyone! It's all right! We are Academy students, we can handle a roc!"

"All civilians, p-please retreat! Th-the Academy and the knights will d-deal with this!"

"The other students and the professors have joined the battle! So you'll be fine!"

Seeing them and hearing their words, a sigh of relief went through the ballroom.

Except for the roc. For a moment, it had appeared calm, but apparently the magical attacks had enraged it again. With a screaming cry, the wounded roc stamped its feet against the ground.

“Look! Another one is coming!”

Apparently the roc had called a companion. Come to think of it, there had been two when we first saw them. Just one had been terrifying enough! Now we had to deal with both of them? Everyone blanched. Even the faces of the Academy students went as white as sheets.

A few moments later, the second roc appeared in a thunder of wings. Eyes burning with fury, it shrieked a battle-cry. The momentary calm in the ballroom broke as everyone once again descended into blind panic.

“We, we’re doomed!”

“Noooo! I don’t want to die!”

The newly arrived roc turned its glare on the mages, who quailed before it.

From out of the rain, a new voice shouted, “Academy students, fall back!”

In their first attack, one of the mages had sliced through the original roc’s rear leg with blades of wind, but apparently they’d failed to immobilize it. That roc twisted, pulling its head free of the ballroom, and flared its wings in challenge as it let out a furious shriek. The second roc turned towards the Academy students, talons raised.

The wind-casting student screamed as he took the blow squarely and went flying. A thicket of red flowers broke his fall, but when he collapsed to the ground, he didn’t get up again.

No... Is he okay? I was worried, but fear still froze my body. Even though I wanted to go help him, I couldn’t make myself move.

Again, the first roc screamed, wings still spread. The high, piercing cry made the air shiver, and terrified everyone in the ballroom even more. Just as that scream rang out, however, the roc’s terrible beak suddenly fell away, cloven in two.

“Academy students, fall back and support us! We will hold the front line!”

Two knights appeared. Apparently they were the ones who had cut the roc's beak.

They must have been fighting the whole time. Their hair was plastered to their heads by rain, and their blue-stained uniforms were sodden and heavy with rainwater. Even so, their hands were steady on their swords as they moved to put themselves between the rocs and the Academy students and the rest of us.

With another screamed challenge, the rocs turned away from the students, clearly recognizing the swords turned towards them as the main threat. The ground shuddered under them. Apparently, they were well and truly angry.

"Dammit, I thought there were only two of them!" one of the knights cursed. "Where'd the other one come from!?"

"They must have called for allies. It happens sometimes, apparently!"

So the monster blood staining their uniforms must have come from the other roc that had peeled away to attack elsewhere. The new roc wasn't one of the pair we'd originally seen, then.

But...something was strange. For all its screams and threats, the first roc that had attacked us wasn't attempting to lash out with talons and beak the way it had before. The only one actually attacking was the second roc, the one that had come later. True, now that the first roc's beak had been cut it couldn't attack that way anymore, but nothing was stopping it from using its talons like before...

In its place, the new roc, which hadn't lost its beak, growled. At the sound, shock waves slammed out from around the monsters, sending the knights and mages trying to defend us flying. Blood flew.

As the battle raged in front of us, the people in the ballroom started to flee.

"Someone, save us!"

"Run away!"

Suddenly, an unfamiliar man grabbed me by the shoulder, his face inches from my own. "Hey, you there! That weird magic earlier, that was you, right?"

Can you do it again!? That's what stopped the roc, wasn't it!?"

"Eh...? Ah..." I stammered.

"I saw you! Please, I don't want to die! That thing, that soap bubble, that calmed the roc down, didn't it!? Do it again, please...!"

Staring at the man's bloodshot eyes, I pictured the roc in the soap bubble again. It *had* looked calm. Even now, for all its fury, the roc I had cast *Soap* on was only brandishing its wings. It wasn't attacking. If I could do that again... It might not be much, but maybe it would help the knights and mages who were fighting the rocs. It wouldn't help them fight, but if it could prevent the monsters from attacking, even temporarily...

My mother's dying words whispered in my ear. *"If you don't know what you should do, then look for something that you can do, and start there. Even if it's only a small thing. Start with what you can do. Just take it one step at a time. Eventually, you'll figure out how to get through it."*

I made my choice. If there was something that even I could do, then I had no reason *not* to do it!

I shook off my terror and turned towards the roc facing off against the knights. I was still scared, but it wasn't as bad as before. My heart was still deafeningly loud, but this time, it wasn't because I was afraid. I wasn't on my own. The magicians and the knights were here, too. And *Soap* might work. This was no time to turn away just because I was scared.

I had something I could do. That gave me strength.

I drew in a deep breath. Let it out. I just needed to calm down. I could do this!

The roc's back was to me. I faced it, and threw everything I had into my magic. *"Soap!"*

Please let this work!

Carrying all my feelings with it, the soap bubble enveloped the roc, just like before. As the bubble wrapped around it, the roc's ruffled feathers smoothed and settled, and it relaxed, becoming docile.

For a moment, everyone — the knights struggling to their feet with swords in

hand even as blood streamed from their wounds, the Academy students still lying on the ground with only their heads raised — simply gaped at it. Which only made sense. Of course it was a shock to see such an implacable enemy become calm and passive!

“What...was that? That magic just now?” The Academy student who had used ice magic stopped halfway through pushing himself back to his feet. He stared at me as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

Following his gaze, the knights saw me. Their eyes widened, and both of them blurted, “The Soap Bubble Saint...!”

Um. Wait. What? Where did that name come from!?

Lucia is Named the Soap Bubble Saint

“To think we would meet you here...! No, wait, we must deal with the roc first. Give us just a moment!”

The knights who had called me “Soap Bubble Saint” turned their swords back to the roc, which had paused its attacks. The Academy students who had gotten back to their feet quickly added their magic to the assault. Including, to my relief, the one who had been struck down by the first roc’s talons; he must have regained consciousness. He looked unsteady, but I could see him gripping the crystal at his chest again.

As the knights struck with their swords, the Academy students unleashed slashing winds and spears of ice, all with incredible force. Beneath that assault, the two rocs let out piercing screams, and collapsed to the ground without ever striking back.

Did we...defeat them...?

Staring at the bodies of the rocs, pierced through with multiple spears of ice, I, and everyone else in the ballroom, held my breath.

“Are they...dead?”

“Are we saved?”

At first, there were only a few disbelieving whispers. Soon, however, they exploded into shouts and cheering that shook the walls of the ballroom. While everyone was cheering, the knights checked to make sure that the rocs were no longer moving. Then, to my surprise, they approached me.

The Academy students were looking after the one who had been swiped by the roc’s talons; his injuries were the most severe. The other two, who were relatively unhurt, stood on either side to support him as he got to his feet. All of them had trickles of blood running down their faces or from the corners of their mouths. The wounds were small, but there were so many of them — it looked so painful. I hoped they would be treated soon. And yet none of them —

especially the knights — seemed to be paying their own condition any mind.

“Um... Thank you for saving us,” I said in a hoarse voice, once the knights had reached me.

They shook their heads. “Nah. It was our fault you had to go through that. Sorry about that,” one of them said. “Still...never would have thought you might be here in the castle, Soap Bubble Saint...”

At the same time, the other said, “You are the one who saved us, now as well as then. It is we who should thank you.”

Come to think of it...when I first met Sir Celes, we’d had a very similar conversation. He’d said that when I met them on their way home from the dragon-slaying expedition, I hadn’t just cleansed their clothes, but their hearts as well.

To be honest, while I did remember cleaning their uniforms, I hadn’t known that my magic could affect hearts as well. But if these knights felt the same as Sir Celes, then it wasn’t just a mistaken impression; my magic really did have that power.

Was it a boring bit of magic or not? Somehow, I felt like I didn’t even understand my own power.

“Please, forgive us for not thanking you before. We have been grateful to you ever since that day,” the second knight continued.

Then both knights knelt before me, right knees raised and heads lowered. I’d seen that pose before. Sir Celes had done it when he had thanked me for using my magic. If they were doing the same thing as Sir Celes, then...!

I hastily hid my hands behind my back. I was not going to make the same mistake again; that was far, far too embarrassing!

Although, if we were going to talk about embarrassing, then what was all this “Soap Bubble Saint” nonsense? That was *also* far, far too embarrassing!

“Please, stop that! Um, would you stand up? I haven’t done anything to deserve being thanked in such a way!” I quickly crouched down, thinking I would die of embarrassment. It felt so *arrogant* to stand there looking down at

the tops of the knights' heads!

"Sacred Maiden, if you are willing, please lend us your power once again," one of the knights said. He had sandy-colored hair.

"Wha-!"

The other knight's hair was a glossy, honey-colored blond. "It appears that your magic has the power to halt the monsters, or at least to calm their hostility. Even the fearsome rocs behaved like simple birds. I have never seen such magic before."

Now that he mentioned it...he was right. The calmed rocs had been just like normal birds, despite their size. They'd been defeated so easily; they hadn't even fought back, just cried out...

"It isn't right for us to ask this of you. It should be our duty to protect you," the honey-blond knight continued. "But due to the casualties from the dragon-slaying expedition a year ago, neither the knight regiments nor the Academy have the forces we need. We will allow no harm to come to you. If we learn that your magic has no effect, then we will immediately see you safely back to the castle."

"We'll protect you, no matter what. So please help us!"

"The ogres should soon be within spellcasting range. All we ask is that you try. Please, help us!"

Their voices were so earnest that I flinched slightly. I had cast *Soap* on the roc in a blind panic. The fear had ebbed a bit now, but if I tried to imagine myself facing a situation like that again...to be honest, the very idea was terrifying. I would much rather hide in the ballroom with everyone else, if I could.

But...if *Soap* really could be of use...if I could truly help protect the people I loved with this magic... And if I could help Sir Celes, who was surely fighting this very moment somewhere in the castle? Then, maybe, I thought I could be brave.

Gathering up my courage with both hands, I nodded. "Well...I really don't know if it will be any use, but...I will try."

At my words, the knights once again lowered their heads to me.

Lucia Helps the Knights

“Thanks! Much obliged, Soap Bubble Saint!” said the sandy-haired knight.

“We will guard you with our lives, rest assured!”

Both of them seemed honestly delighted by my agreement.

But could we please do something about that title!? Putting “soap bubble” and “saint” together sounds far too ridiculous! It’s weird!

“Um... Please just call me Lucia? That title is... Well, it doesn’t seem respectful to the Sacred Maiden, and I really do prefer to be called by my name...”

“Lady Lucia, then!”

“I’m not a Lady!” Apparently these knights had been speaking far too highly of me!

The sandy-haired knight nodded. “If that’s what you prefer... Lucia, I’m Jeremiah Ascari, of the Third Regiment. The skinny guy here is Fedele Blitz.”

“I am at your service, Miss Lucia.” The honey-blond knight bowed.

Blitz? Come to think of it, Sir Celes had mentioned that one of the knights in his regiment came from the Lily Blitz family. Was that this knight, then?

“Well then. If you would accompany us to the wall?” Sir Blitz continued.

Sir Ascari stopped him. “Wait. If she goes out like that, she’ll get soaked. Should we stop by the quartermaster?... Wait, our cloaks would be far too big for her.”

“It’s fine, I’ll go as I am,” I told them. “We’re in a hurry, right?” The rain had already slackened to a light drizzle, and I didn’t mind getting a little wet. Whether or not my *Soap* would work on the ogres, we had to put the defense of Arldat first!

“Then take this,” Sir Blitz said, and draped his own cloak over my shoulders and head. “It’s already wet, so it will be heavy, but it is at least better than

nothing. Besides, the Academy enchants our uniforms with defensive magic, so it will help protect you.”

The cloak *was* heavy, since it was already soaked with rain. But laundrymaids are no weaklings! I could handle something like this, no problem. I did hesitate for a moment, but then I decided it would be best to simply accept for the time being. “Thank you, sir. I will return it as soon as I can.” At my thanks, Sir Blitz grinned happily.

The three of us passed by the bodies of the rocs and headed for the gardens beyond the broken balcony doors. The Academy students, it seemed, would stay behind with the wounded soldier to guard the ballroom. When I heard that, I bowed my head in thanks to them.

“We’ll be leaving the castle briefly. You ready?” Sir Ascari asked me gently.

I nodded. “Yes. I’ll try to keep up.” I was frightened, but I would regret it if I didn’t at least try.



Even considering the rain, it was already quite dark outside. What time was it, anyway?

The main gate of the castle was tightly shut. We went through a small door next to it, meant for the guards, and entered the town.

Ordinarily, the town was as lively as only the royal capital could be. But now, it was deathly quiet. No one had even set out any market booths today, thanks to the rain, and there wasn’t a soul to be seen anywhere. We ran down the empty cobblestone streets, straight down the main road.

When we reached the gates, however, the silence of the streets was broken by the occasional deep, dull *boom* that made the ground vibrate under our feet. Looking around, I saw soldiers clutching their weapons, standing ready to defend the gates. Unlike the knights, the soldiers wore armor. They looked very impressive.

“Third Regiment! Make way! We’re going onto the wall!” Sir Ascari shouted. Immediately, the mass of soldiers parted in front of the staircase next to the gate.

Wow! Oh, but this probably wasn't a good time to be standing around marveling. Sir Ascari launched himself down the path that had opened, Sir Blitz right behind him.

I could feel everyone around me staring, wondering who I was. (I couldn't blame them. A girl dressed like a laundrymaid running alongside two knights? That really made no sense!) Even so, I followed after Sir Blitz and Sir Ascari. Normally, only knights and soldiers were allowed onto the walls, so I'd never been there before. But I couldn't say I was enjoying the experience.

"What's the situation!?" Sir Ascari demanded.

"We've engaged them with catapults! Archers will release as soon as they come within range. As yet, the ogres haven't..." The knight who'd answered him turned and saw me. A deep line furrowing his brow, he demanded, "Who is this?"

Sir Blitz put his hands on my shoulders. "Look closely! This is the *Soap Bubble Saint*, Guido!" he said.

Wait, just how many people use that name!?

"Huh... Wait, what? What is she doing here... Wait, why did you bring her up *here!*?" Sir Guido stared at me in consternation.

Which, yes, I was definitely out of place. I had some doubts myself about what I was doing here!

"Her magic can calm the monsters!" Sir Ascari explained. "The rocs lost all interest in fighting, they just let us slaughter them. They didn't use their shock waves, they just waved their wings and stamped their feet a bit. It's worth a try!"

"I witnessed it with my own eyes," Sir Blitz agreed. "One spell, and even a ferocious roc became as docile as a simple bird. I promise, we will send her back before the walls are endangered. Let her try this!"

Sir Guido gave both of them a long, hard stare, seeming to weigh them with his gray eyes. The knights around us also looked skeptical. "...Really?" Sir Guido asked at last.

“Would I lie at a time like this?” Sir Blitz countered.

“Merchants do lie when it suits them.”

“That is not so! Our motto is to always give our customers the truth! ...And I am a knight!” Apparently without his notice, Sir Blitz’s lips pursed in annoyance. All I could do was listen to them bickering, my heart pounding painfully.

“Forget that, we need to get her to the front! Lucia, this way!” Impatiently, Sir Ascari shoved the gathered knights and soldiers aside, grabbed my hand, and pulled me forward.

I looked out beyond the walls, and froze in horror.

There had to be a hundred of them, maybe more. A horde of who knew how many monsters — surely those were ogres and ogresses — was approaching Arldat in a great mass. They were roaring their fury at the catapult stones falling around them. It was a deep, unsettling sound that seemed to reverberate through my body and sent a chill running down my spine. In all honesty, this was terrifying. In a different way than seeing a roc right in front of me, but terrifying all the same!

Sir Blitz pressed a hand to my shaking shoulders. Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I saw him looking at me with concern in his quiet hazel eyes. “I’m sorry. I suppose this is a bit much for a young girl,” he said. “I hope you can forgive us for relying on you to do this.”

“No. I-I want to do...what I can. If I can help you at all, I have to try.”

I tightened my grip on the cloak draped over my head. Thanks to the watch fires burning in their iron grilles around me, our surroundings were brighter than I’d expected.

Mother. Sir Celes. Please, give me courage!

“Here I go.” I drew in a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Then I set my focus on the approaching monsters, close enough now that I could see them clearly. If I couldn’t make the effort now, then when *would* I?

“*Soap!*” I shouted.

At my incantation, my vision suddenly filled with countless soap bubbles —

and then everything went black.

Lucia Receives Important Visitors

A gentle breeze against my cheek woke me.

When I opened my eyes, I discovered that I was not in my familiar personal room, but one that I'd never seen before. The window was open, and beyond it I could see a clear blue sky, the same color as Sir Celes's eyes. I tried to prop myself up on my elbows in order to get up, and discovered that I had no strength at all. My head was swimming, as if I was suffering from horrible anemia. And I was terribly, terribly cold. Even though I had several blankets piled on top of me, all far finer quality than my own, I felt chilled to the bone.

What's wrong with me? I gave up on trying to raise myself up. My whole body felt so heavy, I couldn't move. But, why? Relaxing back into the bed, I sighed and closed my eyes. I wasn't sleepy, but even keeping my eyelids open was tiresome. So probably the best thing to do for now was to rest.

I laid there for a while, until eventually I noticed the faint sound of voices outside. They sounded like the voices of the knights and soldiers training, maybe. Listening absently to voices giving some sort of instructions, and other voices calling responses, I tried to remember what had happened.

The rocs attacking. The ballroom descending into panic. Freshly spilled blood, washed out by the rain. The horde of ogres winding their way over the land. So many soap bubbles...

Had that...been a dream? None of it felt real at all. But if that were the case, I had no idea why I would be lying here in an unfamiliar room.

As I lay there, eyes shut but ears listening, I heard someone knocking on the door of my room. After four quick, sharp knocks, I heard the rattle of the doorknob turning.

"She should be waking about now... No, seems she's still asleep," a man's voice said. He sounded concerned.

"Then we should come back later, Doctor Beccaria." Another man's voice,

brisker.

“Agreed. If she’s still sleeping, best to let her rest.” That sounded like the hoarse voice of an older man.

My eyes were closed, but I wasn’t actually asleep, so I opened them a crack and turned my face towards the voices. “No, I’m...awake.” Voicing the words took effort, and my voice came out terribly hoarse. How could it be so hard even to talk?

“Well, hello! Thank goodness you’ve woken up. Can you get up? Maybe not?” the first man asked briskly. He was the one they’d called Doctor Beccaria. He was wearing a white coat, and his dark brown hair was shot through with white and tidily bound up at the base of his neck. It gave him a rather charming air.

“I doubt it,” said the older man. He had a long, white beard, and was wearing the deep red robe that marked the highest-ranking members of the Academy of Magic. “You don’t recover from complete mana depletion with a single night’s sleep. It’d be cruel to make her even try.”

In the Academy, novices wore dark blue, while older students wore deep green. Researchers and professors wore dark red. Which meant that this man had to be someone who was quite important in the Academy. It’s said that mages of average power couldn’t even put the red robes on.

“If you’re awake, then we can sort this out quickly,” said the third man, his voice cool and dispassionate. He was wearing the uniform of a knight. “I am Florido Astorga, Vice-Commander of the Knight Regiments of Banfield.”

So this was the vice-commander. But, what was such an important person doing here?

“I’m Adnet Beccaria. I’m the physician for the knights. And the mage here is Master Ivanoe di Vaio, Headmaster of the Academy.”

The vice-commander. The knights’ physician. And now the Headmaster of the Academy!? Normally, I would never even lay eyes on such people. Seeing them all lined up in front of me now, I began trembling underneath my blankets. *What’s going on here!?*

“Now, first things first. Let’s get you something to restore your mana, shall

we? It may taste terrible, but at least it should let you move on your own again.” Doctor Beccaria lifted me up slightly, wedging pillows behind me until my upper body was slightly elevated. As I lay against the pillows, he held out the brilliant blue vial he was holding in his hand. “Can you drink this yourself?”

I tried to make my heavy arm move to grasp the vial, but I couldn’t will any strength into it.

“Well, that’s to be expected. I’ll help you drink it, then. It’ll be unpleasant, but you have to drink it all, understand?” Giving up on handing me the vial, Doctor Beccaria brought it up to my mouth.

Ugh! It smells terrible!

My eyes watering from the smell that wafted from the vial, I desperately drank it down.

It was *awful*! It was so sweet that it made my head ring, while at the same time it was so bitter that my tongue went numb, and I simply wanted to cry! At least go with one or the other!

But after I drank it all, my body did feel just a little bit warmer.

Di Vaio smiled, green eyes crinkling, when he saw my teary eyes. “Terrible, isn’t it? I can’t stand it either. Improving the medicine for mana recovery is one of the top priorities at the Academy, but unfortunately, it’s not going very well.”

If I should ever meet someone who *did* like that stuff, I would question their sanity. The taste was simply that bad!

But after a few minutes, my chilled body had warmed, and my heavy limbs started to feel like they belonged to me again. When I tried, I found that I could move them. The taste may have been terrible, but the medicine was certainly effective! No herbal medicine would work so quickly. What could possibly be in it...?

Now that I could finally talk properly again, I straightened my posture and turned to face the three men. “Um... Thank you very much. My name is Lucia Arca. And, if I may...what brings the three of you here?” I asked carefully.

Doctor Beccaria shrugged. “I just came to check on my patient.”

“I came to verify your powers,” Commander Astorga said.

“And we should start by checking your mana levels,” Di Vaio agreed. “If you’re tapped dry, one of these high-level magic recovery medicines will restore up to one thousand mana. For your average magic user, that’s enough for a full recovery. The Academy students need to take two, and when you get to the level of the teachers, they need three or four vials.” He grinned. “If you’re curious—the Sacred Maiden required six vials for a full recovery.”

Six!? Gods have mercy! The memory of that awful taste ran through my head and I shuddered. Six vials? Never. If I drank that much of it, I would probably keel over dead! And the Sacred Maiden had to drink six of them? I was truly, deeply impressed. Only a Sacred Maiden could do that! Not me.

Doctor Beccaria grinned brightly. “And with that, let’s have you take another, shall we? Don’t worry, I have plenty more!”

“What!?” I stared at the doctor in horror. How could he make such a fiendish demand with such a mild face!

“Once you’ve drunk the second, we’ll measure your mana level. If you’re precisely at two thousand mana, then we’ll have you drink another and measure again. Cheers, Miss Lucia!”

What? No! Without even thinking, I shook my head. But Doctor Beccaria and the others knew no mercy.

In the end, I had to drink *four* of the things... I really wanted something to wash my mouth out.

Lucia is Assessed

Headmaster di Vaio checked the scale on the device he'd stuck in my mouth and nodded to himself. "Well now, isn't this something. Three thousand five hundred mana, I'd say."

Somehow, I wasn't in the mood to celebrate. My eyes were still watering from the medication they'd given me to restore my mana. Because! Seriously! That stuff was *awful*! In my whole life, I'd never drunk nor tasted anything so bad! After drinking *four* of the things, my mouth was so numb that it didn't even feel like it belonged to me anymore.

"So you can measure it in numbers now?" Doctor Beccaria asked.

"We can." Di Vaio gazed at one of the empty vials. "In the dragon-slaying expedition a year ago, the taste of the medicine meant mages took too long to drink it. That caused many casualties. We've spent this past year trying to quantify its effects, in the hopes that we could use the data to develop a weaker version that would be easier to drink."

So why couldn't you give me one of the weaker ones!?

As if he'd read my thoughts, the headmaster sighed heavily. "Unfortunately, it isn't going very well. By the time we thin the flavor to the point where it's drinkable, it loses its restorative effects. We're still dependent on this for the time being." He turned to me, holding out a glass. "Here now, have some water."

I accepted it gratefully. Water was just fine, so long as it washed some of that taste out of my mouth.

"Now then. First of all — as the commanding officer of the knights in the Knight Commander's absence, I wish to thank you, Miss Lucia," Vice-Commander Astorga said, and bowed his head courteously. "With your assistance, we were able to defend Arldat with no serious casualties."

That's right! What happened after all that? I listened attentively to Sir

Astorga's words, still sipping at the water after they refilled it from a pitcher. Which was probably rude of me. Hopefully he would forgive my poor manners!

"Several people were wounded in the rocs' attack, but there were no fatalities. I understand this is thanks to your magic," Sir Astorga continued.

At his words, I rested a hand against my chest. *Thank goodness! I'm glad I found my courage, then.*

"Um... If I may, could you tell me what happened...after?" I asked.

He nodded. "Of course. After you cast your spell, a vast number of soap bubbles appeared and merged together to form one giant bubble. That bubble enveloped the horde of ogres. The moment the bubble vanished, they all turned around and left. It was as if they'd never attacked in the first place."

"At which point you collapsed from mana depletion, so they brought you to me," Doctor Beccaria added. "And let me tell you, getting those knights to leave you was not easy! But, you being a young lady and all, I didn't want any misunderstandings."

So the ogres and ogresses had left without any fighting... Was such a thing even possible? I'd never heard of anything like that happening before.

"The rocs lost their hostility and even stopped using their strongest abilities, like the shock waves. The ogres and ogresses suddenly lost all interest in fighting and simply left. What *is* this magic of yours?" Sir Astorga asked.

"Until now, I never thought it had any effects other than removing stains," I admitted.

"Removing stains... Does that mean that their violence is a form of uncleanness — a corruption, perhaps? In which case, by removing that, they become calm and won't fight humans..." The vice-commander fell into thought, brows furrowed.

"That's rather similar to the Sacred Maiden's Purifying Light, then," di Vaio commented. "Although the Sacred Maiden's Light is more along the lines of simply cauterizing everything in its path."

"I wouldn't compare the two. Still, they do share the effect of purifying

monsters...” Sir Astorga’s expression hardened. “I must notify His Majesty about this. Doctor Beccaria, Headmaster di Vaio, Miss Lucia, if you will excuse me.” The knight left at a fast clip, his cloak flaring out behind him.

“Now then, I’d like to hear a bit more about this magic of yours,” di Vaio said, stroking his long beard. His gaze dropping to my chest, he added, “Speaking of which, what happened to your crystal, young miss? Was it damaged when you fainted?”

To use magic in this world, you needed a crystal to channel it. It was said that all crystals were connected to the Cristallo Sacro, and thus you could use crystals to activate magic. This was why all the mages of the Academy wore crystals on pendants, and would hold them when casting spells.

But I’d only learned that after I came to Arldat. There were no other magic users where I grew up, and no one knew very much about them. I’d always thought of my magic as normal.

So when I’d first come to Arldat, many people had marveled over the way I could use *Soap* without using a crystal.

“I don’t use a crystal,” I replied. “I just...use it as I am.”

Headmaster di Vaio looked stunned. “What!”

“I’ve always just...had it, ever since I was very small. I have no idea what would happen if I tried to activate it using a crystal,” I explained.

“To use magic freely without anything to channel it... Yet another point of similarity with the Sacred Maiden. Hmmm... It seems I should return to the Academy for a time.”

They kept saying that there were similarities between me and the Sacred Maiden. I couldn’t help thinking that it would be rude to claim anything of the sort, we were so very different... What could they have meant by it?

Observing my confusion, Doctor Beccaria smiled. “Well. I think you may want to brace yourself, Miss Lucia.”

I blinked. “For what?”

“An audience with His Majesty. Do you have any fine clothing?”

I froze. *His Majesty? An audience? Where did that come from!?*

Lucia Hears from Friends

“You’d best make sure you’re prepared,” Doctor Beccaria told me. “Given the way they were acting, I suspect you’ll receive a summons quite soon. Now then, I want you to stay here for the time being, Miss Lucia. You’re not ready to go walking about quite yet.” Then he left the room, leaving me to grapple with what he’d just implied.

Alone, I panicked. I didn’t have *any* clothes that would be appropriate for an audience with the king! Thinking of the contents of the closet in my room, I blanched.

I didn’t even know if such a meeting would even be permitted. I was just a servant. Normally, I would never even lay eyes on His Majesty! I couldn’t imagine being allowed to actually meet him. And yet, if such lofty personages such as Vice-Commander Astorga and Headmaster di Vaio were taking an interest in me...I couldn’t be certain.

What am I supposed to do if he does summon me for an audience?

As I was fretting, I heard another knock on the door. When I responded, who should peek in but my friends!

“Chicca! Rossella! Jeanne! Joanne!” I called, delighted. They were all right! Oh, I was so glad to see that.

“You all right, Lucia? Everyone said they didn’t know where you’d gone after helping with those rocs. We’ve been looking for you!” Chicca told me.

Jeanne and Joanne jumped in. “That’s right! We never thought you might be in the knights’ infirmary!”

“Everyone’s talking about you, Lucia. You were so amazing! But who would have thought that *Soap* could be used for more than laundry?”

“Good work, Lucia. Are you all right?” Rossella added.

Looking at their bright faces, I felt as though a heavy weight had lifted from

my shoulders. Finally, I could relax. That terrible time had ended. We were safe now.

As soon as I got out of the bed, Chicca wrapped me up in a big hug. Her body warmth soaked into me, and the gentle smell of soap tickled my nostrils. No no no, I couldn't cry now! I didn't want to worry anyone any more than I already had.

"I'm...so glad everyone's okay," I managed.

"Yes, thanks to you. You went and cleaned up all those ogres for us, didn't you?"

Still wrapped in Chicca's arms, I looked up at her. "How did you...?"

"There were soldiers up on the wall, yes? Soldiers are common folk. I've got plenty of acquaintances among them," she told me.

"My younger brother is a soldier," Rossella added. "He told me. He said a soap bubble sent the ogres away. It had to be you."

"And we know plenty of knights in the Handymen."

"Yes, there are some perks to being laundrymaids for the knights. They told us about you being in this infirmary. Men aren't allowed in here, but that's hardly a problem for us. So we're taking our break time to stop by."

"I really appreciate it. I'm so glad to see you!"

They all grinned at each other.

"Now then, I heard you fainted," Chicca said. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes, they gave me a restorative for mana, so I'm all better now."

"Let us know if there are any problems."

At Rossella's words, I suddenly remembered — there *was* a problem! I hoped nothing would come of it, but based on what Doctor Beccaria said, I would do well to prepare, just in case.

"Um! You see, I don't know for sure, but I've been told...I might be summoned to an audience with the king... But I barely have any personal clothes! What can I wear that wouldn't offend him?"

When I'd been in Hasawes, I'd prioritized buying medicine for my mother, and since I'd come to Arldat most of my money had gone to paying back my debts, so I had barely any personal possessions. Even clothes. Other than the gray apron dress that was my work uniform, which I was wearing right now, all I had was a sky-blue dress that I wore on festival days and a dark blue dress that I wore for my days off.

The twins glanced at each other. "Do you think they might lend you a gown?" Jeanne suggested. "Or...maybe not?"

"If not, then your light blue festival dress might work," Joanne said.

Chicca pursed her lips. "The one you wore for King Lamberto's birthday celebrations? I don't know. It certainly is charming, but..."

"That one? The material is good, and it looks good on you, but it doesn't have any decorations except for the ribbon on the corset. That's a bit too plain. You don't have anything else?"

My brow furrowed. "That's all I have..." I admitted, and Chicca and Rossella both frowned a little in concern.

Maybe I should have bought something, just in case? But no, I had to prioritize paying back my debts. I was close, but I hadn't paid everything off yet.

"I suppose it would be disrespectful to refuse a royal audience?" I asked.

"Best not to," Chicca said briskly. "Lucia, what would you think of adding some embroidery to the light blue dress?"

Jeanne clapped her hands. "Oh, that's a good idea! Even just a little bit would be charming!"

Embroidery... Come to think of it, that did sound better than getting something new. Even if I wasn't called to an audience, it wouldn't be wasted.

"Then let's do that!" I agreed.

"Well then, I can provide the thread for that," Chicca said.

"Thank you. I'll pay you back later. Also, I'm not supposed to leave this room. Could you get the dress from my room for me?"

Chicca waved her hand merrily, a slightly embarrassed smile on her sunburned face. “Oh, there’s no need to pay me! Let us spoil you a little bit. I’d like to do the embroidery for you as well, but...well, I’m no good at fine work like that.”

Lucia Meets the King

After that, they brought me the dress from my room, and I began to work on the embroidery. I worried over the design a bit, but finally settled on a traditional pattern that had long been popular in our kingdom. My mother had taught me how to do it, back when she was healthy.

Because I had been told not to leave this room, I couldn't do my work, so as a result I really had nothing to do except to concentrate on the embroidery. This turned out to be a good thing. A few days later, just as I finished the embroidery, I received the notification that I had been called to meet the king.

"Immediately, sir?" I stared at Sir Astorga, who had brought me the message.

The sharp-eyed vice-commander simply nodded without any reaction to my rude stare. "Yes. His Majesty had an unexpected opening in his schedule. I apologize for the lack of advance notice. Please bear with it."

"But, I don't have any clothes..."

"The dress on the wall there will do. Please hurry."

Apparently they didn't have gowns they could loan. Maybe it was a good thing I'd prepared in advance. *Thank goodness I finished in time*, I thought with a sigh. I was flustered by the sudden summons, but the king was a busy man. It wouldn't do to cause him any trouble.

Once Sir Astorga had stepped outside, I put on the finished dress and tied my hair back with the ribbon that Sir Celes had given me. Rather than my usual basic ponytail, I put a little more effort into it, braiding it into a half-up style.

"Do you think this is good enough? It won't come across as rude?"

"That should be fine."

Was this an urgent meeting, perhaps? I could only tilt my head, wondering what they could possibly want to talk to me about.

“Regardless, if you are ready, then let’s go. His Majesty is waiting.”

“Of course! Please lead the way, sir!”

I never would have dreamed that a day would come when I would have the honor of speaking directly to the king! It wasn’t as scary as facing those monsters, but I was definitely nervous. Nervous enough that my fingers had gone cold. Clenching them, I hurried desperately after Sir Astorga, who had already set off ahead of me. His legs were much longer than mine, and I didn’t want to be left behind.

We passed through the left wing, where the knights had their headquarters. As we entered the central area, where the royal palace was located, I found myself gaping at the magnificent surroundings. The floor of the marble hallway was covered with a thick carpet that seemed like it would swallow my feet up. Even though there were no windows, magical lanterns with stones enchanted with fire magic lined the walls, so it was quite bright. The people we passed all looked refined and elegant. I felt like I was in a dream.

It was a long way to the audience chamber. When we finally arrived, it was heavily guarded by knights of the First Regiment. It drove home all over again what an incredibly important person the king was. All of this was far too weighty for a simple common-born girl like myself!

As I was gaping, the well-tended door opened smoothly, without so much as a creak.

I wasn’t certain what the proper etiquette was, but since it would be rude to look directly at His Majesty’s face, I carefully looked down as I stepped forward. Was...was that all right?

I studied Vice-Commander Astorga’s blue cloak at the edge of my vision and my own reflection in the shining marble floor as my thoughts raced. Why had they even called me here in the first place? Was it...because I had repelled the ogres’ attack, maybe? *Just please don’t scold me*, I prayed.

As I shook with nerves, a voice suddenly said, “You are Lucia Arca?”

Could that be His Majesty’s voice? It was deep and resonant, and full of a solemn dignity. In comparison, I could only cringe and say, in a small, thin voice,

“Y-Yes, m’lord...”

“Florido and Ivanoe have told me of your power. Is it true that your magic pacifies monsters, then?”

Was it true? Was that something that someone could fake?

My words jammed in my throat. I had no idea how to answer. Or if I even should give a direct answer. I’d lived my entire life as an ordinary person, I had no clue how I was supposed to respond at a time like this. I’d never even met nobility; I’d never even in my wildest dreams imagined that I might have the opportunity to encounter *royalty*.

As I hesitated, struggling for a response, Sir Astorga said, “If I may, Your Majesty. We have received reports from both the knight regiments and the soldiers. I also saw it with my own eyes. We believe it to be true.”

He answered for me! Thank you! And, he had been on the walls back then? I hadn’t noticed at all.

I relaxed just a little bit. Maybe I had needed help, but I’d managed to get through that part. But the king’s next words left me dumbfounded all over again.

“I see. Then, Lucia Arca. You are commanded to rendezvous with the Sacred Maiden, Maria, and to use this magic to assist her. You will be rewarded generously.”

Of course... Wait, *what!?*

Lucia Sets Out on a Journey

At the king's words, I unthinkingly raised my face in shock.

Looking at His Majesty's visage up close for the first time...he looked so incredibly tired. His cheeks were hollow, his face pale.

"That will be all. It seems you are able to render monsters docile. In that case, they present little threat to you. One escort will be sufficient."

"Your Majesty, she is still a young girl. At least let us send a unit of soldiers..." Sir Astorga said.

"Even if we assigned a whole army to accompany her, they would only be sent back again," His Majesty replied. "We cannot afford wasted effort. Our forces are weakened at the moment. If the castle is attacked again, we will be lost. If we are to maintain our defenses, we cannot send our strongest with her, nor too many people. Had the Sacred Maiden not rejected her attendants and soldiers, perhaps we would not have needed to rely on this girl, but... Florido, I leave the selection of her escort to you. Choose someone who will allow no harm to come to her, and who will be of assistance to the prince and his companions. Young lady, pack your belongings and depart with all haste. Help the Sacred Maiden. Help the prince. Your kingdom has need of you."

Feeling as though there was nothing I could say, I looked down again. From what I understood, I had been chosen to become a member of the company traveling with the Sacred Maiden on her purification expedition. That was a great honor...but to be honest, I was scared.

I'd been so terrified when the monsters had attacked. Did I have to go through that again? Yes, I had my *Soap* magic, but that was no assurance of safety.

I was an ordinary human being. I just happened to have a slightly odd ability; I didn't know how to hold a sword, or how to slay an enemy, or even how to heal wounds with magic. How could someone like me manage as one of the Sacred

Maiden's companions? Thinking that way just made the unease even worse.

Honestly, the part about being rewarded was very welcome. I didn't know how much it would be, but it would certainly be enough to pay off my debts. But who ever heard of a simple laundrymaid joining such companions! The Sacred Maiden, the crown prince of the kingdom, the Knight Commander, the Dragonslayer, and the best mage of the Academy!

They were all extraordinary. I was far too ordinary to be one of them.

...But, based on the conversation, it had already been decided that I would go to find the Sacred Maiden. In that case, I had no choice but to brace myself to do whatever I could.

I sighed softly, a little depressed.

Unexpectedly, I found myself thinking about the Sacred Maiden. She'd come from another world. Was she accustomed to fighting and combat? Or was she as scared as I felt now?

Lady Maria, the Sacred Maiden. I didn't know what sort of person she was, but if we should meet, I would like to ask her. And if she was as scared as I felt, and still trying... Was it insolent of me, to hope that I could be able to help her, as a person from this world?

"Lady Lucia, let us return to the knights' quarters. Follow me," Sir Astorga said.

That's right. I'm scared, but there has to be something that even I, weak as I am, can do.

With that in mind, I swore that I would do everything I could. If I couldn't avoid the journey, then I would throw everything I had into it!

"Yes, m'lord!"

I would trust that the future at the end of the road would be a bright one, and move forward.



I set out the next morning, while it was still dark. It was a shockingly early departure, but it wasn't my place to comment.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but the sky was clear, with almost no clouds. Looking at the way the deep indigo sky shifted to pale purple, and then a blazing orange, it seemed like today would be a lovely, clear day. A perfect day to do laundry. Although I probably wouldn't be doing laundry for a while.

I shook out the hem of my dress and headed for where I would meet my escort with quick steps. The festival dress I had worn the day before was tucked into the bag hanging from my shoulder, but when it came to moving freely, my ordinary casual-wear dress was much better. Mostly because it had the same design as my uniform, I supposed.

I'd returned the laundrymaid's uniform that I usually wore. I wouldn't be working for a while.

...I wonder if I'll be able to go back, once this journey is over. When I'd asked how they would divide up the work, everyone had told me not to worry about it, but I was still concerned. If they hired someone new, I wouldn't have anywhere to come back to. Even if everyone wanted to wait for me, the laundry had to be done. It might be best to prepare myself in case I couldn't go back. Given that they'd said there would be a reward, I should at least be able to pay off my debts. There was only a little bit left.

"You Lucia?"

I'd arrived at the place I'd been told to go while I was thinking. A tall knight was waiting there. His powerful muscles were so big I could make them out through his uniform, and he had a scruffy dark brown beard that framed his whole face. Looking at him...made me think of a bear, a little.

"I'm Gaius Canalis, of the Fourth Regiment. I'll be your guard, little lady. Just call me Gaius. Good to meet you."

"I'm Lucia Arca. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir!"

I couldn't help noticing the greatsword slung over Sir Gaius's back. It looked like it would be hard enough for him to unsheathe it, with it behind his back; how did he use it? Or put it back after?

Sir Gaius pointed at the bag hanging from my shoulder. "That all you're bringing?" he asked.

I'd gotten ready the day before, with Sir Astorga's assistance. (I would have been fine on my own, but he generously accompanied me.) Since I didn't own very much to begin with, my bag was fairly compact by nature.

"Yes, this is it."

"Pass it over, I'll fix it to the saddle."

When I handed it to him, Sir Gaius muttered, "That weighs nothing!" and quickly added it to the rest of his gear. Well, there wasn't much in there to begin with, so it probably was fairly light.



“Right. Let’s be off, then.” Leading the horse, Sir Gaius set off at a nonchalant walk. You’d never think, looking at him, that we were setting off on a dangerous journey. “We’ll take the north gate,” he told me, as the clop of the horse’s hooves echoed through the empty streets of the city.

Most people generally used the southern gate, which connected to the kingdom’s main roads; the northern gate didn’t see a lot of use. We’d probably manage to set off without anyone noticing.

At least, that’s what I thought — until we reached the north gate.

“Lucia!”

Far from being quiet, the north gate was even busier than the south gate usually was!

“Chicca!”

All of my friends were there. Chicca, Rossella, Jeanne, and Joanne. And it wasn’t just them, either. For some reason, there was a crowd of knights there as well.

“You be careful out there now, Lucia! You haven’t forgotten anything? Do you have any emergency supplies? Oh, I’m going to worry so!” Chicca gushed.

“Safety comes first,” Rossella reminded me. “No shame in running away.”

The twins added, “Oh, Lucia! I do hope you’ll be okay!”

“Here, these are from us. Eat them when you get tired. They’re baked sweets from Fioravanti’s. They keep for a long time, and taste wonderful. When you come back, we’ll go have one of the Fioravanti cakes! My treat! So you *have* to come back!”

They’d all come to see me off, even when it was so early. I was so happy, the words got tangled up in my throat. I never thought they might come out just to say goodbye!

“I’m sorry,” Sir Blitz said glumly. “If we hadn’t asked you to help that day, you wouldn’t have had to risk yourself like this...”

“Sir Canalis here has his quirks, but his strength is undeniable. You can trust

him to protect you. Sorry it came to this, when you're not a knight, or a soldier, or part of the Academy," Sir Ascari said.

Sir Blitz, Sir Ascari, you don't need to look so down! I smiled at them, and their downcast expressions brightened. I turned to everyone who had gathered at the gate and bowed my head gratefully.

"Chicca, Rossella, Jeanne, Joanne, Sir Blitz, Sir Ascari, everyone... Thank you so much. Take care, everyone!"

At that, everyone responded with a chorus of goodbyes and well-wishes. I even saw some of the knights dabbing at tears, which was a very strange feeling.

So many people were cheering for me. Surely this would go well!

Just as Sir Gaius was about to begin walking, Sir Blitz handed me a small bag. "Miss Lucia, please take this. These are some of Lily Blitz's best lotions, and our most popular hand cream! There's also oil for your hair inside, but the scent is still a trial product. When you come back, please tell us what you think of it!"

Hand cream... Oh! Come to think of it, I'd never thanked Sir Blitz!

"Um, Sir Blitz..."

"Please, call me Fedele, Miss Lucia."

"Oh. All right. Actually, Sir Fedele, Sir Celes gave me the hand cream that you gifted to him. I'm sorry, he seemed to be worried that I was too hard on my hands, but..."

"Sir...Celes?" Sir Blitz — Sir Fedele, rather — blinked. At least he didn't seem to be angry that Sir Celes had given his gift away. "Miss Lucia, you know Sir 'Celes,' then?"

"Yes. We met about three months ago."

"Three months... Oh *really*."

Sir Fedele and Sir Ascari both smiled brightly. All the other knights had similar smiles on their faces. At least, they were definitely smiling, but...was it my imagination, or was there something frightfully intimidating about the looks on their faces?

“I’m sorry. I suppose I must have hurt your feelings,” I said.

“Oh, not at all, it’s quite all right,” Sir Fedele reassured me. “That hand cream was far better suited to you than ‘Sir Celes,’ Miss Lucia. Do please use it freely.”

I rested a hand against my chest, relieved. I’d already tucked the hand cream I’d received from Sir Celes into my bag. I was sad that I hadn’t been able to meet Sir Celes again, but I still had his ribbon. I felt like it gave me strength.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“Not at all,” Sir Fedele said, with a bright, amiable smile.

Encouraged, I decided to ask about something that had been bothering me. “Um...if I may ask, is Sir Celes well? I had heard that he’d returned to the capital, but I still haven’t seen him yet...”

It had been bothering me since we’d left. When I didn’t see that kind smile anywhere in the crowd of people who’d come to see us off, I suddenly wondered if maybe he had been wounded.

“Ah, him? He’s on a...rather demanding mission at the moment, so he wasn’t able to come,” Sir Fedele replied.

“He wasn’t hurt in the roc attack?”

“As a rule, it doesn’t matter what happens, that guy will come through without a scratch. Even when we fought the dragon, he got through it without any serious injuries, despite being on the front lines. His swordwork is the best of all of us, and he always seems to land on his feet. He almost never gets himself hurt.”

So Sir Celes was out on a mission, then. I’d hoped to be able to see him, but...work was work.

Disappointed, I asked, “Um...would you give him my regards?”

Sir Ascari shook his head. “Well... You know, I think it would be better for you to tell him yourself. Pretty sure the Cap...er, Sir Celes would be happier just to see you, rather than hearing it from us.”

So make sure to come back safe, he implied. It made me laugh a little.

“By the by, Miss Lucia. Sorry about this, but would you pass a message on to our captain? He’s with the Sacred Maiden,” Sir Fedele asked.

“Certainly!”

For some reason, Sir Gaius suddenly started laughing. Why? Had we said something funny?

“Sir Gaius, are you all right?” I asked.

“Nah, don’t mind me, keep going,” he snickered, hand pressed to his mouth as he turned away. From the way his shoulders were shaking, he was still laughing. “...*Oh Cap’n, you’re in trouble now...*”

Was our conversation really that amusing? It seemed normal enough to me...

Ignoring Sir Gaius’s laughter, Sir Fedele beamed. “Please tell him, *we await your return. Brace yourself.*”

I nodded. “Of course. I’ll make certain to tell him!”

For some reason, Sir Gaius, standing next to me, patted me on the head. I had no idea why he’d done that, but something about being patted on the head by someone my father’s age gave me a bubbly, happy feeling.

Still. The captain of the Third Regiment... That would be the famed Dragonslayer, wouldn’t it. For all of his subordinates to miss him so, he was surely a good person. I was looking forward to the day that I would meet him.

“We’re off, then!” Tucking the parcel from Sir Fedele into my bag, I waved goodbye, and then we left Arldat. If it was to protect all of the people I loved, then I could do this!

Thus began my unexpected journey.

Lucia Rides with Gaius

“Huh. So you’ve really never ridden a horse before, miss.”

Once we had left Arldat, Sir Gaius and I had mounted the horse he had been leading. I’d explained earlier that I had no horseback riding experience, so we only had the one horse. Sir Gaius had put a cushion atop the saddle in front of him; that was to be my seat. I sat down in front of him, but...every step the horse took jolted through me. Though Sir Gaius had said we were only going at a “light” trot, every muscle in my body was screaming after only an hour. Even as I was sitting on the ground now, taking a breather, my teeth were still rattling.

“I, I haven’t... It’s very difficult, isn’t it? You knights are incredible...”

Riding in a wagon was certainly bumpy, but the shock was even more direct on horseback. I was going to be so sore later. And the view from the horse’s back was so high up, it was terrifying!

“You tense up too much,” Sir Gaius told me. “Don’t use more strength than you need to. Relax, straighten your back, and trust the horse.”

Easy for *him* to say.

Sir Gaius ran a hand through his beard. “Stretching will help, too. Hard to ride if your hips are stiff. Try to do stretches every day, miss.”

Eep. Stretching with sore muscles sounded even more painful... But I wasn’t exactly in a position to complain, so I let Sir Gaius teach me a set of stretches.

I really wanted to rest, though...

While I worked on the straddle-stretches I’d learned, Sir Gaius spread out a map next to me and explained our next steps. “The expedition is traveling with His Highness and Her Sacredness, so I’m thinking that odds are they’ll stick to the main roads. The Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest is the closest to the capital. If we aim for that and ride hard along the back roads at first, we should catch up with them in a few days.”

Which meant...he planned to go as fast as the horse could take us. True, we needed to catch up as quickly as possible, which meant I had to bear with it, but... Oh, my poor seat bones!

“At first?” I asked. “We won’t take the back roads the whole way?”

Sir Gaius smiled wryly. “Well, based on what the lot who came back to the capital said, the expedition is stopping at every major town along the way. Seems His Highness and Her Sacredness don’t care for camping. So I’m thinking we’re best off taking the back roads up to where they parted ways with the expedition, then getting back on the main road to meet up with them.”

That...made sense, actually. It certainly was hard to imagine the crown prince camping out.

“We could head straight for the Cristallo Sacro along the back roads, but it’s better to meet up with the rest as soon as we can,” Sir Gaius concluded. “Are you all right with camping, miss? Would you prefer staying in an inn?”

“I don’t mind camping,” I assured him. “I did it before, when I rode with the carriages to get to the capital. I don’t think it will be a problem. Although I can’t say that for sure, since I don’t know how sparse a knight’s camp would be.”

Sir Gaius cackled. “Oh-ho, you’re more of a trooper than I expected. Glad I can count on you.” Reaching out, he ruffled my hair.

Privately, I wondered, *Is this what a father is like?*

My own father had died when I was still young. People told me that he’d been a member of Hasawes’s town guard, and that he’d died fighting a monster that had appeared near the town. He’d been tall, with dark brown hair and reddish-brown eyes that were almost black, and he was a merry, kind man. That was all I knew about him. I’d been barely three years old at the time, so I didn’t actually remember him.

I wonder if he was like Sir Gaius? Maybe it was the similar hair color, but I couldn’t help wondering. Although it might be rude to compare an honored knight to a simple town guardsman.

“Something wrong?”

“Oh! No, it’s nothing!” I answered hastily.

“That so? Right then, about time we got moving again! Today we’ll take the back roads and ride hard for the town of Tello. We can eat there, and hopefully find an inn for the night.”

“We won’t be camping?”

“I’m not making a young lady who’s not used to traveling camp out on the very first night!” Sir Gaius declared grandly, starting to saddle the now-rested horse. “Better to keep things simple at first.”

Once the saddle was on, he loaded our bags. With everything settled, I accepted his hand and climbed back onto the horse. Immediately, the ground seemed to fall away as my line of sight rose.

“All right, here we go! Keep your mouth shut so you don’t bite your tongue!”

P-Please be gentle!

But my tiny shriek was lost in the wind.

Lucia Goes to Tello

Sir Gaius knew no mercy.

I mean — yes, we had no idea how far the Sacred Maiden’s expedition had gotten. So it was for the best that we catch up as quickly as possible.

But! But-but-but! I’d never ridden a horse before! This sort of forced march was far too hard for me!

I knew it wouldn’t help, so I couldn’t complain, but I was crying on the inside. My seat hurt. My legs hurt. Even my arms and my back hurt! By the time we arrived at our destination of Tello, I was completely wrung out. Even though we’d set out at dawn, the sun was already beginning to set. I was *so tired*...!

“Good work today, little lady,” Sir Gaius said. “Think you can eat something?”

“I, I’ll...do my best...”

Honestly, I wasn’t the least bit hungry. I just wanted to go straight to bed. But I had the feeling that it was best not to complain, so I bit the words back. If I gave in to exhaustion here, then moving forward I might just become baggage to be dragged along. I wasn’t used to traveling, and I had no combat experience. All I had going for me was *Soap* and my own determination.

I swore to do everything I could! The very least I can do at this point is make sure I’m not a burden!

There was so much I couldn’t do. Which meant I absolutely must not turn my back on anything I *might* be able to do. Although that was probably just plain old stubbornness.

In the darkening evening, the town of Tello was full of lively voices talking and delicious smells. Other than my hometown of Hasawes, I’d never been to any town other than Arldat. I couldn’t help staring all around me at this new town. It was a far cry from both the sleepy calm of Hasawes and the hustle and bustle of Arldat. The courtyard just inside the main town gate was full of shop stalls, with a fountain in the center. Chairs had been set up in front of the stalls, and

they were full of people with food and drinks in their hands.

Sir Gaius noticed me staring. “Folks sometimes call Tello the town of food stalls,” he said kindly. “There’s plenty of good food here. Anything you care to eat, little lady? If not, I’ll just pick something out.”

The smell of meat roasting drifted through the air. Maybe I was a little hungry after all!

“I’ll eat anything!” I said. “Although, anything that’s extremely sweet and bitter...”

Sir Gaius interrupted. “Pretty sure there’s no food like *that*.”

Oh, right. That had been a medicine. I shoved the memory of the mana recovery medicine out of my mind. I really hoped I would never have to depend on that again!

“Let’s hit the inn first,” Sir Gaius suggested. “We can eat once we’ve dropped our things off. I’m starving!”

“Oh, right...”

We crossed the plaza with all its temptations and headed for a large inn on the far side. I’d worried about whether or not we would be able to find a place to stay, but it seemed they had open rooms, and we were able to get one for each of us! The room that I was shown to was startlingly large compared to my old room in the dorms, but apparently most of the rooms in this inn were the same size. Amazing!

We left the inn and hurried back to the plaza.

“Let’s start off with some meat! And I could use a drink.” Sir Gaius headed towards a stall selling alcohol near the entrance. “Hey there! One black ale!”

“You aren’t worried about getting drunk?” I asked. I’d always pictured the knights as being very serious about their duties. I never thought that they might drink on the job. Was I wrong?

Oh... But come to think of it, this would be a long journey. So taking some downtime to relax on occasion would be important. We’d made it to the inn, so in a way, we were off-duty now. Sir Gaius was even wearing regular clothes,

rather than his uniform.

“Black ale is basically water,” Sir Gaius insisted.

“But, I’ve never had alcohol...”

“Good point. You’re still a child, aren’t you.”

“I’m sixteen!”

“That counts as a child so far as I care. Hey, get me an orange juice as well,” Sir Gaius called.

Juice! He really was treating me like a child!

But...somehow, that made me a little happy. *I’m sorry, Sir Gaius. I can’t help wondering if my father was like you!*

Sir Gaius kept ordering. “After that, we’ll have the beef skewers and sausages. Six of each. And...let’s have three of the fried trout sandwiches.” He glanced over his shoulder at me.

Meat! How many years had it been since I’d had beef? The dining hall for servants generally served chicken at most, and when I’d lived in Hasawes we hadn’t had the budget to buy meat.

I didn’t realize I had a dopey grin on my face until Sir Gaius smirked at me. Augh, I was so embarrassed!

“Anything else you want?” he asked.

“No, that will be plenty,” I said. Six skewers of beef, six sausages, three sandwiches... How much of that was for me? One each would be plenty, but...

Ultimately, I had one of the sandwiches, but Sir Gaius insisted on giving me two each of the rest. I appreciated the thought, really, but that was too much!

Then Sir Gaius said, “Eat your vegetables,” and ordered a hearty vegetable stew from a nearby stall, and *then* he said, “Children like their sweets, I suppose,” and bought me an apple pie. *If this keeps going then my stomach’s going to explode!* He was the sort of person who liked to fuss over someone, apparently.

Sir Gaius was sitting back with a pleased look on his face, yet another black

ale in his hands — I'd lost count of how many he'd had. He didn't seem at all interested in returning to the inn. I suppose it made sense that a knight would have far more endurance than I.

As I struggled against my sleepiness, Sir Gaius exclaimed, "So the Sacred Maiden herself came through here!"

"That's right! Seeing her standing with His Highness the prince, why, you'd never seen such a beautiful couple!" the stall owner said.

"Though she and the prince went straight to the inn and stayed cooped up in there; didn't come out to the stalls. Pity; I'd have liked to serve them some of my fried dumplings," another commented.

"As if! Your stuff wouldn't suit a prince's refined tastes anyway."

"What was that!? Not like anyone asked for your fried fish, either!"

So the Sacred Maiden passed this way, then... I thought.

"So when'd all this happen?" Gaius asked.

"I'd say it was about seven days ago."

"Yep. Now our Tello can be known as a town that the Sacred Maiden herself graced!"

Wait. Was Sir Gaius gathering information!? He'd done it so casually, I hadn't even noticed!

Seven days... Sir Celes had told me that if you went by horse along the back roads, then it would take about seven days to reach the nearest Cristallo Sacro. In that case, by now they had probably arrived. Oh, but he'd also said that they would be using the main roads. In that case, it was much harder to guess where the Sacred Maiden and her companions might be right now.

"Hey, what about that daughter of yours there, mister? She looks about the Sacred Maiden's age. Hey miss, what do you think of this fried dumpling?" The man with the dumpling stall handed a package of dumplings to Sir Gaius.

"Good thought! Lucia, try one of these."

Try one? But I was already so full!

“Awfully cute daughter for a big bear like you. Your wife must’ve been quite a beauty!”

“What do you mean, *been*? The missus is holding down the fort back home. We’re just taking a little father-daughter trip.”

I knew he was just playing along with the merchant’s assumptions, but being treated like Sir Gaius’s daughter made me a little bashful.

All right, time to step up to the challenge! I’d do my best, as his “daughter.” Trying to placate my already over-full stomach, I took a big bite of the fried dumpling Sir Gaius handed me.

Wait, I don’t need the fried fish, too! It’s quite enough, really!

In the end, we didn’t return to the inn until very late. I was so tired, I fell asleep the moment my head touched the pillow, and slept until morning without even dreaming.

And when the sun rose the next morning, I found myself back on the horse again.

“You sleepy, little lady?”

I was used to getting up early, but between the unfamiliar work of riding and the late night, it was a struggle to wake up. I’d tried to hide my yawns, but Sir Gaius noticed anyway.

“All right then, I’ll support you, so go ahead and nap on the road.”

“That’s impossible!” How could anyone sleep with the horse jolting them about like that? Waving off Sir Gaius’s ridiculous suggestion, I straightened. “So, if the Sacred Maiden passed through Tello seven days ago, does that mean they’ll be reaching the Cristallo Sacro about now?” I asked.

“I doubt that,” Sir Gaius said. “They were near Tello when they sent the soldiers and attendants back, you see.”

“Eh? But...we only left Arldat a day ago...”

“It’s a four-day journey to get here by the main roads. We got here so quickly by taking the back roads,” Sir Gaius explained.

Oh. Come to think of it, when we'd been riding, we'd taken paths that barely counted as roads. Cutting across fields and such.

"You can get to the Cristallo Sacro in seven days by taking the back roads, but the expedition is taking the main roads, and they're resting as they go. I'd say it'll take them...about twenty days to get there, maybe?"

"Is it safe to go so slowly?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. After all, outside city walls, you might encounter monsters.

"Who knows what they're thinking. Although it sounds like they're stopping in towns to avoid the monsters." Sir Gaius twirled the long hairs of his beard, then shook his head. "Well, if they're taking it easy, that means we can catch up that much faster. Now, hang on and keep your mouth closed. If you're not going to sleep either way, then we might as well ride hard!"

Wait, I almost managed to yelp, but the horse picked up its speed first.

Oh, I hoped we caught up with the Sacred Maiden soon! I didn't know how long I could survive this!

Lucia Searches for the Sacred Maiden's Group

After that, we continued taking the unroadlike back roads, stopping at larger towns to gather information.

And yes, of course, we occasionally encountered monsters. But Sir Gaius had been chosen as my guard for a reason; he was powerful. Powerful enough that when I froze in fear, he could tell me, "You don't need to do anything. If you're scared, just close your eyes."

His confidence began to give me confidence. After all, what was the point of me setting out on this journey if I always just cowered in the back? Sir Gaius was kind enough to tell me that I didn't need to fight, but even if I couldn't stand beside him, at the very least I had to make sure I wouldn't slow him down!

Therefore, as I got used to combat with the monsters, I started casting *Soap* on them, trying to at least help Sir Gaius a little. Besides, I needed to properly understand what effects it had. No slacking off!

"Out of the way!"

"*Soap!*"

The greatsword in Sir Gaius's hands slashed down the Phaian boar in front of us. I cast *Soap* on the boar behind Sir Gaius, keeping it from attacking.

As we'd thought, when I cast my magic on something, they all became calm and docile, like regular animals. The rampaging Phaian boar had lost all interest in us, and was just acting like a normal pig now. Watching it lazily scratch its white fur against the branch of a tree, you would never have thought that it was a dangerous monster. That part was mystifying, no matter how many times I'd seen it.

However, Sir Gaius immediately slew the calmed boar.

I'd asked if we could simply let them go rather than killing them. But Sir Gaius reminded me that we could hardly let them go when we had no idea how long

the effect of my magic would last. The damage that monsters could do to people was simply too great to risk it. Put that way, I had to agree.

“Can’t say I enjoy butchering monsters that won’t fight back, though. Feels like I’m just needlessly killing.” There was a troubled look on Sir Gaius’s face. “We should’ve had the Academy take a look at your magic’s effects before we left, little lady.”

“Would they have done that, even though I’m not a student there?” I asked.

“Given that your magic’s unique, they’d probably be delighted to take you in. What do you think, want to pay them a visit when we finish our quest and return to the castle?”

He was right. All other things aside, we had to complete the purification of the Cristallo Sacro. But, I didn’t want to go home to the Academy. I wanted to go back to my old position. I wanted to have fun working with my friends, and eating with Sir Celes on sunny days. My goal was to go back to that warm time!

“Once the Cristallo Sacro are cleansed, there won’t be as many monsters anymore, right?” I said instead. “After that, I don’t think there will be much need for my magic other than for laundry, much less bother the Academy with it.”

Sir Gaius nodded. “You have a point.” Putting his greatsword away, he pulled out a knife for dismembering the monster. We could hardly leave monster corpses lying around, so every time, we had to dig a hole, dismember the corpses and bury them... It was a lot of work.

Digging holes was something that I could help with, so I went to fetch the portable shovel that the horse was carrying. This sort of clean-up really made me think that if we could avoid fighting the monsters, we should. The monsters wouldn’t have to die, Sir Gaius wouldn’t have to fight, and I wouldn’t have to dig holes. This was *irritating*.

My journey with Sir Gaius continued that way. And then...

I could hear raised voices up ahead.

“Ugh! Why won’t this come out!? Eri-kun, you’re supposed to be a mage! Do

something about this! I *like* this dress! Ed gave it to me special for this trip... Celes, can't you do anything about this?"

"You do realize I'm a *fire* mage? Do you want me to burn it to cinders?"

"I'm sorry, my lady. Monster blood does not come out... Although, I do know that the laundresses who work for the knights have a way of dealing with it. Perhaps you could set it aside for our return?"

"Then we're going back to the castle! We're still close enough to go back, right?"

"I'm glad you've taken such a liking to it, Maria."

"My apologies, Sacred Maiden, but we cannot afford any further delays. As Celestino says, it would be best for you to change for now, and set the dress aside for later."

"Ho, looks like we've finally caught up!" Sir Gaius cheered behind me.

We'd found the Sacred Maiden and her expedition! Oh, thank goodness!

Lucia Learns Celes's Identity

The first to notice us was a slender knight with glasses and long hair waving in the wind. He looked more like a bureaucrat than a knight.

“Brother!”

Brother? Startled, I looked over my shoulder at Sir Gaius. Had that knight just called him brother? Ignoring my skeptical stare, Sir Gaius waved a hand casually, acting the same as ever. “Hey, Reynard. Fancy meeting you here!”

The knight that Sir Gaius had called Reynard called out to the people around him, and began running towards us. Another did as well, a knight with tousled golden hair who... *Wait a minute!*

Reflexively, I rubbed my eyes. Because that looked like...

“Sir Celes!?”

It *was* Sir Celes. But, why? Wasn't he back in Arl-dat? I panicked for a moment, but...that was unmistakably Sir Celes before me.

“Lucia, what are you doing here!?” Arriving at our side in no time at all, Sir Celes extended his hands to where I sat stiff as a board on the saddle. Without thinking (habit can be a powerful thing!), I took his hand and slid down from the horse.

I stared at the man in front of me intently. He was indeed Sir Celes. No doubt about it. But if Sir Celes was here, and not among the knights and soldiers who'd been sent back, then that meant...

Finally, everything fell into place.

Why Sir Celes had been so startled when I'd asked about the Dragonslayer.

Sir Fedele's and the other knights' strange expressions.

Why Sir Gaius had laughed so hard.

Of course they would react that way. My Sir Celes was none other than the

captain of the Third Regiment, the famed Dragonslayer, Celestino Clementi!

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

Looking at Sir Celes anew, I saw the regimental insignia that he'd never had before dangling from the clasp of his blue cloak. When I'd become a laundrymaid, Chicca had taught me that only those with the rank of captain and higher were allowed to display their insignia publicly. In other words, the man before me was unmistakably the captain of the Third Regiment of the kingdom's knights.

Looking at it, I panicked. I mean, it never even occurred to me that Sir Celes might be the Dragonslayer! He may have been born common, but he'd risen to the rank of a famed knight-captain. In comparison, I was utterly common. What a complete mismatch.

"Lucia?" he asked. In contrast to my flustered state, Sir Celes was acting the same as ever.

Suddenly, I wanted to cry. "Sir Celes" might not mind, but this wasn't a back courtyard of the castle. His Highness the crown prince himself was here. Could I still speak casually to Sir Celes, as I always had? I couldn't decide.

Surely Sir Celes would prefer me to treat him as I had before. He was the one who'd laughed and said the Dragonslayer was a human being, the same as me. And I *wanted* to. I wanted to talk to him like I usually did. I didn't want to act as though we were strangers.

But...in a certain sense, that had always been during our private time. This was far more public. I didn't know how to treat him.

Sir Gaius thumped me on the shoulder. "Oi. Lucia."

I came back to myself. "...Oh! Right!" Oh dear, I was still holding Sir Celes's hand! I didn't want to, but it would probably be a good idea to let go, wouldn't it?

"Lucia..." Sir Celes started, looking troubled.

"Say, didn't you have a message from the guys in the Third?" Sir Gaius interrupted.

“Oh, yes! Um, Sir Celes.” Spurred by Sir Gaius, I turned to Sir Celes. This was no time to be flustered — I had to properly convey the feelings entrusted to me! “They asked me to tell you, ‘Everyone awaits your return’... Hey! Sir Gaius, why are you laughing!?”

He’d exploded into laughter at my words. Clutching at his stomach, Sir Gaius patted me on the head as I glared at him a bit. “Don’t forget the rest of it, Lucia. They also said, ‘Brace yourself,’ Cap’n.”

“...You are Gaius Canalis?”

“You even know the names and faces of the guys from the other regiments, eh? That’s our hero.”

“Enough joking. Why did you bring her here?” Sir Celes demanded. He seemed to be angry. Because I was here? ...Probably.

“Celes! Who are these people!?”

Startled by the new voices, I turned. While I’d been distracted, the rest of the Sacred Maiden’s party had reached us.

“Oh? Did they send Maria a new attendant?”

“Sheesh. She’ll just send them back. What’s the point of making them come all this way when the Sacred Maiden already said she doesn’t want ’em?”

Out of the hubbub rose a new voice, slightly older than Gaius. “Gaius, what are you two doing here? Who is this girl?” the man asked suspiciously.

Sir Gaius smirked. “We’re here by the king’s orders. This is Lucia. She’s got a power similar to the Sacred Maiden’s.”

Lucia Becomes the Sacred Maiden's Attendant

"What!?"

At Sir Gaius's announcement, everyone shouted in chorus. Including me! *Sir Gaius, the only connection between my power and the Sacred Maiden's is purification!*

Sir Gaius pulled a letter from his pocket and passed it to a stern-looking man with short blond hair that was smoothed back. "Here, Commander. Letter from the king. I imagine the details are written up there."

The man — who must have been Knight Commander Agliardi — opened the letter and read it intently. His hair had an adorable little cowlick right at the top of his head — or, wait, was I being rude again?

"Hey! What is all this nonsense!?"

A young woman with the beautiful face of a fairy-tale princess stormed forward, shoulders back and graceful eyebrows lowered in fury as she planted herself in front of Sir Gaius.

"A power like mine?" the Sacred Maiden demanded, her face flushed and jet-black eyes sparking with anger. "If you had someone like that around, then what was the point of bringing me here!? You've got to be kidding me!" She turned that blazing glare at me. "You there!"

"Y-yes'm!" I reflexively straightened.

"What do you think you're doing here!?"

What was I doing...? Um, should I say that I was here to help the Sacred Maiden?

When I hesitated to answer, the Sacred Maiden's rage grew. "What do you think you're doing, turning up now!? Get away from Celes!" she shouted.

"Sacred Maiden, she is..."

The Sacred Maiden grabbed the front of his uniform. "Celes! You're *my*

bodyguard, aren't you!? What are you doing, getting all friendly with a plain little thing like that!" she ranted. "Are you trying to make me even angrier, when I'm already upset!? You there, go home! We don't need two Sacred Maidens!"

Had something unpleasant happened to the Sacred Maiden? Going by what I'd heard, she'd been angry from the start. Which meant that the first step should be to calm her anger. But how?

When in doubt, talk to people.

"Sacred Maiden," I started.

"What!?"

"It's an honor to meet you. My name is Lucia Arca. Originally, I only knew that my power could remove stains from laundry. We learned that it had another effect when I happened to use it on a monster, but it is nothing like your magic of sacred light."

Proper greetings were important when meeting someone for the first time. And I had to clear up this misunderstanding. *We are as different as the heavens and the earth, Sacred Maiden!* And so, I introduced myself to her.

It turned out that, when startled, her large eyes grew even wider. Looking at her long eyelashes, I found myself thinking, *So this is what people mean when they speak of someone as a beauty.*

"What was that!?" she pressed. "Taking stains out of laundry?"

"Yes, my lady. It can remove any kind of stain!"

"Then clean this dress up! If you can do that, then you can become my attendant. How's that?"

The Sacred Maiden spread out the hem of the dress she was wearing. The lovely pale pink fabric was spattered with blue marks. It was unmistakably monster blood, and that certainly wouldn't come out using normal washing techniques!

But removing stains was my specialty. Glad to show off what I was best at, I confidently focused my attention on the Sacred Maiden's dress. "Of course, my

lady. Leave it to me. *Soap!*”

“Oh!” the Sacred Maiden yelped, as my magic enveloped her.

I’m sorry! Of course it would be a surprise to have magic cast on you unexpectedly! Please forgive me! After all, only children run about playing with soap bubbles!

The Sacred Maiden stared at her now stain-free dress. “Wha—”

“Hey!” A boy wearing the robe of an Academy mage abruptly pushed her aside. “Hey, that magic just now, what was it? I’ve never seen or heard of anything like that!”

His clear amber eyes were sparkling with intense curiosity. To my shock, the robes he wore were a deep red. To look at him, you would think him maybe ten years old, but apparently he was truly talented.

“I’m Eric Acquafresca. As you probably noticed, I’m an Academy researcher.” The boy indicated the hem of his robe, turning a full-faced smile on me. His friendliness was adorable, and with his wide gold eyes, he reminded me of nothing so much as a kitten.

“I’m honored to meet you, Lord Acquafresca. I’m Lucia Arca.”

“Eric’s fine, I don’t bother with all the stuffy formalities. But, Lucia, that magic...”

“Hey! What are you butting in for!” The Sacred Maiden shoved herself between Lord Eric and me, grabbing the front of my dress. It hurt a little. “Erikun, back off! You, you said your name was Lucia? Those soap bubbles, what were they? Did they do this?”



“You meant removing the stain?” I asked.

The Sacred Maiden mumbled something, still clutching at my chest. “No! It’s like...I feel a little better somehow, or... Anyway! That, that *onsen*-sort of feeling — that was your magic, right!?” A hint of redness had risen in her cheeks; it was incredibly cute. “All right, I’ve decided. You said your name was Lucia? You are now my attendant! You can’t leave. Oh, but even if you’re my attendant, I don’t want you fawning all over me! I really do *not* need that. But you have to cast that spell every day! And if you’re a bother, I’ll send you straight back!”

Apparently the Sacred Maiden was quite taken with *Soap*. Perhaps she was simply a fastidious person? Traveling was dirty and dusty, even if you were riding in a carriage.

“I’ve never seen you so enthusiastic, Maria. You must have taken a liking to her.”

The Sacred Maiden’s face immediately brightened as the prince approached us. “Ed!” she cried. “It’s not like *that*. It’s just, we can’t bathe every day, right? But right now, it felt like I’d gotten to soak in a hot tub, it was lovely. Besides, wouldn’t it be helpful to have an attendant to handle the laundry? But if she ends up acting like those others, I don’t want her. They were such a pain! Didn’t you think so?”

“You certainly are free-spirited. I suppose that’s what I like about you.”

Looking at the shining prince and the Sacred Maiden standing together, it was like a scene from a painting.

While I was watching them, someone grabbed my arm.

“Lucia.” It was Sir Celes. “Lucia, what’s going on?” he asked. His usual cheery expression was nowhere to be seen; instead, his face was hard as he studied me.

Oh, that’s right — we hadn’t really explained the situation, had we? I freed my arm from his grasp and went to step back a bit, but this time he grabbed onto my wrist, keeping me from moving. Was he really that interested in hearing why I had been chosen? Well, I suppose it was rather unprecedented, a laundrymaid being sent on a quest like this. Naturally he’d be concerned.

“The castle was attacked,” I told him.

“Wha...!”

The color left Sir Celes’s face as I explained about the roc attack. Come to think of it, I felt a little strange now. I’d been so certain, back then, that Sir Celes was somewhere in the castle. But of course I hadn’t seen him. He hadn’t been there at all.

“We evacuated, but then a roc attacked, and I ended up casting *Soap* on it, and it calmed down... Then, Sir Fedele and Sir Ascari asked for my help, so I tried casting it on the ogres, and for some reason they all left. So when the king heard about it, he ordered Sir Gaius and me to come help the Sacred Maiden,” I explained.

“Sir...Fedele?”

“Yes. He’s been worried about you, Sir Celes.”

Sir Celes was certainly beloved. I was glad he had so many good subordinates.

I was sure he’d be happy, but Sir Celes had a very different reaction. “Blitz...I’ll get you for this!”

“Wait, why?” I yelped, startled by Sir Celes’s unexpected response. Why would he be angry?

Sir Celes just said, “Still, I’m glad you’re all right, Lucia. If something had happened to you...”

“Oh, the castle was fine!” I said hastily. “A few people got hurt, but Sir Astorga said that no one died...”

“Ahh... Yes, of course. That’s a relief. Well done, Lucia.”

“Indeed, I was so glad!” He praised me! I was so happy, and bashful at the same time; suddenly, I couldn’t look Sir Celes in the face. I had done a good job, hadn’t I? Thank goodness I’d tried so hard...

“Still, what could His Majesty possibly be thinking, sending you out when you’re neither a knight, nor a soldier, nor a mage,” Sir Celes growled. “Is that guy the only person he sent to guard you? Sheesh. Why did they only send one? If the rest of the guys had the time to send messages, then he should have sent

them! Lucia, nothing happened on your way here, did it!?”

“Nothing in particular, other than getting a little practice at fighting monsters,” I assured him.

“Oh...I see. And it was just the two of you.”

“Well, yes?”

“That bear didn’t try anything funny, did he!?” Sir Celes demanded.

Sir Gaius huffed, joining the conversation with obvious amusement. “Okay, not gonna let that one slide, Cap’n. I’m Lucia’s protector. Unlike you.”

Sir Celes grimaced.

Sir Gaius did seem to be having quite a lot of fun. And they knew each other’s names, so could it be they were friends?

Then the Sacred Maiden jumped into the conversation, ignoring Sir Gaius completely to latch onto Sir Celes’s arm. “Oh Celes! Look at this! My dress is all clean now! I’m so happy!”

“...That’s wonderful, Sacred Maiden.”

“Come now, you should be happier for her, Cap’n *Sacred Maiden’s Protector*, sir.”

“Shut up, you bear!”

Sir Gaius roared with laughter.

“So, Lucia! Show me that magic you used again! Oh, before that, let me measure your mana levels!” While I was watching Sir Celes and the Sacred Maiden, and Sir Gaius’s laughter at the two of them, Lord Eric — or, wait, it seems he would prefer to be called Eric? — came up to me.

“Oh dear. Apparently my brother has found new toys to play with...” Behind Eric, Sir Gaius’s younger brother had also joined us. Although, between his slender build and long hair, he didn’t look anything like Sir Gaius. Perhaps they would look more similar if Sir Gaius shaved his beard? ...No, I still couldn’t picture it.

“Miss Lucia, I am Reynard Canalis. I’m the younger brother of the bear over

there. Please, simply call me Reynard. I hope my brother treated you politely during your journey?”

“I’m Lucia Arca. Sir Gaius has been very kind to me. I’m glad that he was the one to accompany me.”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it. My brother has his quirks, so there are many people who can’t stand him... I’m glad that you don’t mind.” Sir Reynard smiled at me.

Ah-hah! The way his eyes crinkled when he smiled was just like Sir Gaius! So they really were brothers.

“C’mon, Reynard, aren’t you done talking yet? It’s my turn! Hey, Lucia, could you hold this in your mouth for a moment?” Eric held out... Waaaait a minute, I’d seen that before!

“I’m not drinking that mana restorative!” I said hastily.

“You’ve had that before? Don’t worry. I just want to measure your mana levels right now! I measure, you use your magic, then we measure it again. You need data to do research!” With a bright, charming smile, Eric handed me the measurement device. When I accepted it warily, he pulled out a notepad and pen.

“Great! Hurry up and take the measurement, Lucia!”

Lord Reynard raised an eyebrow. “Master Eric, do you mean to pester Miss Lucia? I recall that the Sacred Maiden was quite irate with you before.”

“But! They both use magic I’ve never seen before! Of course I need to collect data about it!”

“You are such a fiend for research...”

“Aw, you’re too kind.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

I’d just been thinking that Sir Gaius and Sir Celes made an amusing comedy routine, but Lord Reynard and Eric weren’t half bad either. They might not look at all alike, but the siblings really were similar to each other, weren’t they?

Lucia Does the Sacred Maiden's Laundry

As I was watching Lord Reynard and Eric bicker, Knight Commander Agliardi approached, the king's letter in one hand, as he talked to the prince. When he reached me, he knelt on one knee before me, his blue cloak fluttering as he moved. While I was distracted by the flash of his insignia, he took one of my hands.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Fernando Agliardi, commander of the knights. Miss Lucia, it seems that you saved the castle in a time of crisis. As a knight charged with protecting the realm, please allow me to express my heartfelt thanks. You must have been terrified, but you still used your power to help us. Thank you."

As he spoke, Commander Agliardi pressed his forehead against my fingers. Which...wasn't quite what I'd expected? When Sir Celes had done something similar, he'd... Oh no, now I was thinking about that! It was so embarrassing!

Blushing, I looked past Sir Agliardi and saw the prince.

"Lucia, right? Good job," he said casually.

"Prince Edoardo, treat your vassals that way and soon you won't have any," Commander Agliardi said.

"Stop nagging me, Fernando," the prince said sulkily.

If I recalled correctly, Prince Edoardo, the crown prince of Banfield, had turned twenty this year. Although his tone of voice made him seem a little younger than his age. Clearly, he trusted Commander Agliardi enough to presume on the knight's patience.

The prince called to the Sacred Maiden, "Maria, you should come back now. If you keep hanging on Celes like that, I'm going to get jealous, you know?"

At the prince's words, Lady Maria beamed happily at him. "Oh, Ed, you're so cute!"

Apparently he'd come to call the Sacred Maiden back. Were we in the way, perhaps? I'd gotten the impression that the Sacred Maiden and Sir Celes were close, but...were she and the prince courting each other after all?

At some point, the Sacred Maiden had detached herself from the prince and grabbed me by the arm. "You're coming, too!"

"My lady?"

She headed for the carriage, pulling me behind her. "Isn't it obvious? You're going to be my attendant, aren't you? My attendant needs to stay with me! I have so much laundry for you! I'll hold the clothes, so you just use your magic on me at the same time, got it?"

"Ah, Lucia..." Sir Celes started to call out to me from where he'd been facing off against Sir Gaius, but with the Sacred Maiden dragging me along by the arm, I wasn't even able to call back to him.

I'm sorry, Sir Celes. But...in a way, I was also grateful. I still hadn't figured out how I should act towards him.

"Here we are!" The Sacred Maiden slammed the door of the carriage closed behind us and began throwing open the tops of the seats, pillows and all, and pulling out dresses that had been stored inside. "Ed will come by later. Now, here's the laundry! You're sure that magic of yours will clean it all up, right?"

"Ah, yes, my lady," I stammered.

"Well, what are you waiting for!" With a strange sort of eagerness, the Sacred Maiden thrust a dress at me.

So, I was supposed to cast *Soap* on both the dress and the Sacred Maiden, right? "*Soap!*"

The wagon might have been spacious, but it was still an enclosed space. In an instant, soap bubbles were everywhere. Using it indoors...might not have been a good idea.

I'll use it outside next time! I promised silently. *I'm so, so sorry, Sacred Maiden.*

But even though the wagon was filled to the brim with soap bubbles, the

Sacred Maiden didn't seem startled at all. In fact, she seemed very pleased. "You know...these soap bubbles. At first, I didn't get them at all and it ticked me off. But they're *really* nice!"

Could it be that she'd taken a liking to the bubbles? Oh, I hoped so!

"And you. Lucia, you said?"

"Yes, Sacred Maiden. It is an honor to meet you!"

The Sacred Maiden dropped down to sit heavily on one of the undisturbed seats. "Oh — that Sacred Maiden business. Could you knock it off? Everyone here is all Sacred Maiden this and Sacred Maiden that, and I'm so sick of it! And they won't *stop*. Are the people in this world just really stubborn or something?" she asked wearily.

"Then, what would you like me to call you?" I asked.

"My name is Nishime Maria. Maria's fine."

"Lady Maria?"

"Don't call me 'Lady'!"

"Then, Miss Maria?" I suggested.

"...That'll do," she said. "You know, you seem so much more normal than the attendants I've had so far."

Normal? Well, that made a kind of sense. Most of the attendants in the palace were young noblewomen practicing for their own marriages. They and I were as different as the heavens and the earth.

On the other hand, I didn't know the first thing about elegance or the proper etiquette to address a noble lady. Circumstances had led me to become an attendant, but...would this be a problem?

"I'm sorry. Until now, I was just a laundrymaid, so I don't know much about being a proper attendant..." I started.

"A proper attendant?" Miss Maria snorted. "What, you mean like putting a girl up on a pedestal while you whisper nasty things behind her back? Like sneaking looks at Ed and Celes, and swarming around them in the hopes of

getting there first the minute it looks like you might be able to touch them? Ugh, this world is so selfish!”

She crossed her legs. Which...meant that her legs were showing under the hem of her skirt. Was that all right? They said that young noblewomen were supposed to avoid showing their legs. Could it be that the high-class women who worked as attendants couldn't handle this sort of behavior?

“Um... Miss Maria?” I started.

“What?” She glowered up at me through her eyelashes. She probably would be angry at the comparison, but she reminded me of a kitten puffing its fur out.

“There's something that I really wanted to ask you, if we ever happened to meet.”

“Wh-What? Now *you* want something from me...?”

“Miss Maria...are you scared of fighting?” I asked, voicing the things I'd wondered. “When I first encountered a monster, I was absolutely terrified. It made me wonder if maybe you felt the same way.”

“So what if I am!” she demanded.

“If you're scared of fighting...I'll protect you.”

“.....Eh?”

“I can't fight, but my *Soap*, it cleanses them of...their will to fight? Their hostility? Something like that,” I told her. “So I was thinking...if I cast it on the monsters, you won't have to fight, Miss Maria.”

Miss Maria's jaw dropped.

Lucia Makes Maria Cry

Miss Maria's pink lips trembled. "Why..." she whispered, as if the words had been wrung out of her. Tears welled up in her large, dark-lashed eyes. "Why, why, *why!*?"

Eh? Wait, why? Had I said something that I shouldn't have!?

"Why are *you* the one to say that to me? Isn't that supposed to be the sort of thing that a prince says, or a knight? Why are you...why are you the *only* one...!" Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

"S-Sorry!" I babbled, completely flustered. *D-Don't cry! Please, don't cry!*

But, as if some inner dam had broken, Miss Maria burst into sobs.

"Why are you the only one to care about *me!*?" she wailed, sniffing.

"Everyone has expectations about the Sacred Maiden, they only stand by me because I'm the Sacred Maiden, no one notices or cares if *I'm* scared! They didn't even ask me if I was scared! The people of this world just dragged me from my world and pleaded 'help us, help us!' Not one person said they'd help *me...*!"

When I reflexively reached out for her, she threw herself at me, clinging with all the strength in her slender body.

"I'm scared!" she cried. "Why do I have to fight? Ed and Celes and Eri-*kun* and Reynard, they all act like fighting is so normal, so why do *I* have to fight, too!? Until just a little while ago, I was just a high school student! Just because I suddenly got dragged to a different world, it doesn't mean I know anything about fighting! Yes, I'm pretty. Yes, I got into fights with girls who were jealous, but I'd never had anything scary happen to me! I'd never seen something die in front of me before!"

Miss Maria's sobbing broke my heart. I found myself remembering Sir Celes's face as he told me, "After all, he's human."

Of course. Even if you had a special power, that didn't mean you were

accustomed to fighting. You'd still think it was scary. You still wouldn't want to fight.

“When those soap bubbles wrapped around me, I felt safe. It was like my mother was hugging me. I haven't felt safe since I came to this world. I don't care about handsome guys or being a Sacred Maiden or whatever, I just want to go *home*...!”

The girl I was holding...was a normal girl, just like me. She had an unusual ability, but she was still afraid of fighting. We weren't exceptional. Miss Maria and I, we were both ordinary girls suddenly forced into exceptional circumstances.

Clasping her small, delicate hands, I threaded our fingers together. “I'll protect you,” I told her. “I don't like being scared either, but I'll do my best to keep you from being scared.”

Raising her head from my shoulder, Miss Maria gave me a small, winsome smile. “Please do. When things get scary, hold my hand and show me those soap bubbles. If you do...I think I'll be able to try, a little.”



Then she scrubbed her tears away with her sleeve, straightening her expression as though nothing had happened. Her eyes were still a little red, but even so, she was strikingly beautiful. “I haven’t cried in front of someone since I came here. I’m so embarrassed. This was just between you and me, got it?”

“I understand. I won’t tell anyone,” I promised.

“I’ve been so ticked off ever since they brought me here,” she said. “Everything’s so inconvenient, and people were always watching me, and no one let me do anything. At least I can somehow speak the language, but since I didn’t know anything about this world I’ve had to study nonstop, and they made me drink that awful medicine over and over again... I just felt wretched! Everyone tiptoes around my feelings, but no one sees me as a person. It makes me so mad! But then, when that soap bubble of yours touched me, I suddenly felt so much better. What *is* it, anyway?”

“I don’t really understand it myself,” I admitted.

“You’re kidding me!” Miss Maria tumbled back onto the seat, cackling gleefully. “You’re weird. Everyone here keeps their distance, like they’re scared of me or as if I’m some sort of goddess. Why don’t you? I mean, I’m hardly one to say this, but I am the Sacred Maiden, you know?”

“Well...someone told me once that even if someone seems exceptional, they’re still human, just like me,” I explained. “When they said that, I thought that they had a point. It’s so easy to declare that someone is special. But then suddenly everyone keeps their distance from the ones they’ve decided are special. I started thinking, maybe those people are lonely, maybe they don’t like it...”

I had to think about the person who had led me to notice that.

Come to think of it, Sir Celes was the one who told me, “The Dragonslayer isn’t special, he’s just an ordinary person,” wasn’t he? Which meant, that was the way he wanted to be treated. Which meant I must have hurt him just now, keeping him at arm’s length like that.

Oh no. What have I done!? It wasn’t a matter of how other people would see it. I’d done something horrible to a dear friend.

I have to apologize! I didn't know if he would forgive me, but if I didn't properly talk to him, that would just leave bad feelings between us!

"Miss Maria! I'm sorry about this, but may I step outside for a little while?" I pleaded.

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"I need to apologize to someone."

"Huh?" Miss Maria blinked.

Oh, I even blew him off when he tried to talk to me earlier. He might be angry at me. I couldn't bear it if he hated me!

"Are you...talking about Celes?" Miss Maria asked. "You seemed to know each other."

"Yes, Sir Celes," I said. "He's a very special friend to me, but I treated him very badly... I realized that just now, talking to you. So I'd like to go and apologize."

"Hmmm, so Celes is a very special friend. Is that so." A grumpy look crossed Miss Maria's face. "So do you like Celes?"

"Well...of course I do?"

"You're friends?"

"It might seem strange — our stations in life are so very different — but we do eat our lunches together. So yes, we're friends."

"Is that so. You know, since I wasn't going to be able to go home and had to live my life as the Sacred Maiden, I figured I should at least get myself a reverse harem of hot guys to wait on me, but...Celes was so serious. No matter what moves I put on him, he never wavered. I mean, I was wondering what kind of complete wuss wouldn't be attracted to someone as cute and gorgeous as me, but... Yeah, I get it now." Miss Maria set her hands on her hips and sighed. Then she turned away, making a shooing motion with her hand. "Well, I feel just a little bit sorry for Celes, so you can go today. Besides, I have Ed, Eri-kun, and Reynard."

"Thank you so much!"

“But once you’re done making up, come straight back here! I’ll get mad if you don’t stay by me! You’re my attendant, got that?”

“Of course!”

Leaving Miss Maria by herself, I leapt out of the wagon. Now, where would Sir Celes be? Looking about, I soon saw him standing next to a white horse.

“Sir Celes!”

At my shout, Sir Celes whirled about to face me. When our eyes met, Sir Celes’s usual smile spread across his face. “Lucia!”

I was so eager to talk to him, I ran as fast as I could. We had to talk as soon as possible. I had to apologize, and if he would forgive me, there were so many things I wanted to talk about!

Sir Celes had to grab my shoulders to keep me from crashing into him. Oops — I’d been running too fast to stop!

“Sir...Celes...! I, I’m sorry!” I blurted immediately.

Sir Celes’s eyes widened. “Lucia?”

Hoping he would listen, I let the words pour out. “I’m sorry for acting so distant towards you. I’ve only ever talked to you when it was just the two of us, and it never occurred to me that you might be the Dragonslayer...and I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to behave in front of Miss Maria and His Highness. Even though you’re still the Sir Celes I’ve always known, I treated a dear friend very badly.”

“A friend...right, I suppose so...” Sir Celes smiled weakly.

Oh no. I *had* hurt him!

Sir Celes let out a long sigh, then leaned in to look at my face. “Say, Lucia. If you care about me, then try to treat me as the same ‘Celes’ you’ve always known. I don’t want you to start treating me like a hero now. Please don’t make a wall between us. I want you beside me.”

Sir Celes’s beautiful blue eyes stared straight into mine. Oh no. Having such a handsome man looking at me so seriously was not good for my heart! It was

pounding so hard, I was certain Sir Celes could hear it!

Hoping to calm the pounding of my heart, I pressed my hands against my chest. My face was so hot that I just *knew* I was blushing! While I was standing there trying to contain myself, Sir Celes reached out for the nape of my neck and fingered the pink flower-ribbon that he had given me.

“You’re using the ribbon, I see. I’m glad. It looks good on you.”

Did Sir Celes even know what he did to people with his serious expressions and full-faced smiles!? If not, then there were probably many girls who got the wrong idea. No, I mustn’t get the wrong idea either! It was impossible that a dashing, grown man like Sir Celes wouldn’t have a single sweetheart. We were *friends*. It would be conceited of me to mistake my position.

Besides. I didn’t have the time to worry about romance. We had to make sure this journey succeeded!

“I did say that when we met again, I’d return your ribbon. But, you know...”
Sir Celes pulled my ribbon out of his pocket.

Looking at it properly, it was so battered and worn-out that I regretted ever giving it to him. I felt like my face was about to burst into flame when Sir Celes looked at it. *Stop, please don’t stare so intently at that threadbare thing!*

“Lucia, would you let me keep this?” Sir Celes asked.

“Eh? No! It’s so threadbare, I’m embarrassed!”

“Didn’t I tell you that this was the one I wanted?” he reminded me.

“You did, but...”

“Exactly. I’m fine with this one. Anything else wouldn’t be a proper token. So it’s fine, right? Right?”

Y-Your face is too close! That’s practically coercion!

“Lucia?”

“Um, I-I understand, so could you please step back a bit...?”

“Thank goodness! Thank you, Lucia!” Sir Celes turned a blindingly bright smile on me as I stood there, trying to remember how to breathe.

When he got serious, Sir Celes might be...a *little* scary.

Lucia Prepares to Depart

When I ran away from Sir Celes — I mean, returned to the wagon, Miss Maria gave me a concerned look. “What’s with the red face? Did he do something?” she asked.

“No! Nothing! Nothing at all!” Right, it wasn’t like anything had happened. I’d just gotten a little flustered. I pressed my hands to my cheeks. They were hot to the touch. *I must be beet red!*

“Reeeally?” Miss Maria’s eyes glinted “That doesn’t look like nothing to me.”

Just then, the prince entered the carriage. “You look like you’re having fun, Maria.”

“Ed!”

“Ah, you have the new attendant with you.” The prince gave me a glance. “You may leave.”

He then turned all his attention to Miss Maria. He truly must have been taken with her; I got the impression that he wasn’t seeing anything except Miss Maria anymore.

“But I want Lucia with me, too!” Miss Maria complained.

“You do? But she’s an attendant, isn’t she?” The prince gently held Miss Maria’s chin. “Besides...I kind of wanted to be alone with you...”

“Oh! I-I’ll just step outside!” I said.

His Highness was incredible. So much pressure! Well, I was glad they were getting along, at least.

When I left the carriage, I saw Sir Gaius beckoning. He must have been waiting for me. “Hey! Little lady, we’re about to set out!”

As I hurried over to Sir Gaius, I saw Sir Celes say something to him. Suddenly, Sir Gaius looked very amused. So they were getting along, too!

“Eh, might as well give it a try.” With that, Sir Gaius began to detach my cushion from his saddle. Perhaps he thought that I would be riding in the carriage?

“Sir Gaius, could I ride with you?” I asked.

“Hmmm.” Clearly enjoying himself immensely, Sir Gaius handed the cushion over to Sir Celes. “Don’t you think it’s a good idea to ride with someone other than me from time to time?” White teeth flashing in a broad grin, he looked pointedly at Sir Celes.

Eh!? But, did that mean he wanted me to ride with Sir Celes? Wait, but after what had happened earlier — I hadn’t gotten my composure back yet, or maybe my heart wasn’t ready yet...

“Sir Gaius, maybe that’s not a good idea?” I pleaded, a little desperately.

But Sir Gaius turned me down with a merciless grin. “Nah, you young things should hang out with other young things from time to time. This old man’s taking a break!”

If he wanted to take a break, I couldn’t really impose on him anymore...but if I had to ride with Sir Celes right now, I was afraid my heart was going to explode!

“Hey, you can ride with me! Then we could talk about your magic!” Eric offered.

“Master Eric, do you know how to ride a horse with a passenger? It’s not easy,” Sir Celes told him.

Eric hesitated. “Well...”

“Is the mini-magician not so good with horses? Give it up, it’d end with both of you falling off,” Sir Gaius declared.

“Don’t call me mini just because you’re a big bear!”

“But you are mini. In inches and in years.”

Oh dear. They had a point, to a beginning rider I really would be baggage...
And you were so considerate to offer, Eric! I’m sorry!

As they argued, Commander Agliardi came over, Lord Reynard following him.

“You seem to be having fun,” the commander said. “But we need to set out soon. I want to reach the first of the Cristallo Sacro by today or tomorrow.”

“Hear that? Better get cracking, Cap’n.”

“Brother, please stop picking fights... Lord Celestino, Lady Lucia, I apologize for him,” Lord Reynard sighed.

They were right, we couldn’t afford to waste time here. Right, time for me to grit my teeth and bear with it! It would be fine, I could just think of it as being the same as our usual lunches. I was still a little shaken from earlier, but generally we just talked normally. And we had so much to talk about, too!

Firmly pushing down my agitation, I dipped my head. “Sir Celes, I’m sorry to impose on you like this.”

“Not at all.” Sir Celes gave me a bright smile and helped me up onto the horse. I really did need to learn how to mount and dismount on my own. It wasn’t right for me to bother people every time.

Checking that I was on the horse, Sir Agliardi ordered, “Is everyone ready? Then let’s move out!”

He was riding on a dapple-gray horse, while Lord Reynard was driving the carriage. It was a shock to realize anew how small our traveling group was. I’d heard that the Sacred Maiden had sent away her attendants, but I couldn’t help but think that they should have kept the soldiers with them, at least.

While I was thinking, Sir Celes wrapped an arm around my waist and murmured in my ear, “We’re going.”

Sir Gaius had never held me unless he was pushing the horse fast, so I started a little in surprise. “Oh, right!”

Oh dear. We’d never actually touched like this when we’d been at the castle, so I felt suddenly bashful. I suspected my heart was going at twice its usual pace. But my own inner shyness aside, we set off without any trouble. Our first destination: the Cristallo Sacro of Kyriest!

Lucia and Celes Chat

We moved at an incredibly slow pace after joining the rest of the expedition. Apparently the next town was very close. I could scarcely believe that Sir Gaius and I had ridden so hard to get this far. Although at the time, we had been focused on catching up as quickly as possible, of course.

But now, our pace was leisurely enough that we could talk, even riding horseback. Given that I still wasn't accustomed to riding, it was a welcome change.

"Getting this far must have been hard," Sir Celes commented casually, as we continued down the road following Sir Agliardi. Ahead, I could see the carriage that Miss Maria and His Highness were riding in. Was Maria letting the prince spoil her a bit? She seemed to have been struggling a great deal.

"It really was!" I agreed. "I never thought that riding a horse could be so hard. I was so sore! But Sir Gaius taught me some stretches, and I've been working on them. He even got me a cushion!"

"Heh...very considerate, for a bear."

"It's Sir Gaius!" I chided him. Talking like this, it felt like we were back in the castle courtyard again. The weather was even nice, although by now the sun was rather low in the sky.

"He has been very kind to me," I told Sir Celes. "Whenever I worked hard at something, he would pat me on the head and praise me. Oh, and when we stopped in a town called Tello on the way, he fed me *so much*. He just kept handing me food until I was sure I was going to pop!"

Thinking back, I had to laugh. I'd tried so hard to eat everything, while Sir Gaius just kept giving me more and more. I would finish one thing, and he'd push two more at me! By the end, we'd had a whole mountain of food to deal with. But Sir Gaius had just wolfed it all down, with a mug of ale in his other hand. I'd probably eaten a whole lifetime's worth of meat that day. Roasted and

boiled and fried and all of it delicious!

“I was so full that I couldn’t even eat breakfast the next day! But Sir Gaius didn’t have any problems,” I added.

“Hmph. Sounds like you’ve really taken a liking to your Sir Gaius,” Sir Celes said.

“Oh, I love him!”

“...Is that so.”

“I wonder if fathers are like that... What was your father like, Sir Celes?”

“Father!?” Sir Celes yelped. When I looked at him, his sky-blue eyes were round with surprise. Was it really such a strange question?

But Sir Celes quickly recovered. “My father, huh... I told you that I was born a commoner, right?”

I thought back on our past conversation. If I recalled correctly, Sir Celes’s hometown was called Mist, a place to the west of the capital. It was basically directly opposite of my own hometown of Hasawes, to the east.

“Yes. I think you said your family ran a general store?”

“Right. My father was a carpenter. When I said I wanted to learn swordwork, he made me a wooden practice sword. That was the sort of person he was, really. When I was young and insisted that I wanted to be a knight, not a merchant, he never held it against me. He encouraged me. He even got me into a sword-training class held by the town guards...although I had doubts myself about whether it was a good idea.”

What an open-minded father! I thought.

The gentle warmth of Sir Celes’s words made it clear how much he loved his father. Looking at his gentle, calm sky-blue eyes, I felt a thrill of delight.

“Well, thanks to all that, I was able to meet you,” Sir Celes added. “I really have to be grateful to my father.”

“All his hard work created a great hero,” I agreed.

“Didn’t I tell you not to treat me like a hero?” he complained. “By the way —

you smell very nice, Lucia. Are you wearing something?”

At his comment, I fingered my hair. Surely that was what he meant. “Yes! When I left the capital, Sir Fedele gave me a bunch of Lily Blitz’s products. One of them was a hair oil. I really liked the scent, so I’ve been using it, but...maybe the smell is a little too strong?”

It had been mixed in with the lotions and other items, in a cute little vial. I’d really enjoyed the flowery scent, since it was fresh rather than cloying. But apparently it was strong enough that, even though I’d only used a very little bit before I’d gone to sleep last night, Sir Celes could still notice it now, riding with me. Perhaps I should just not use it? It might not be good for my fellow rider, or for the horse.

“No, it’s a good scent, it suits you, but...Blitz, huh...”

“Should I quit using it? Sir Gaius said that this much would be fine and wouldn’t bother the horses. But I suppose when we’re sitting this close together, it might get annoying.”

“It’s all right, don’t worry about it. I barely noticed it, and the horse doesn’t seem to mind.”

So Sir Celes thought it was all right? I relaxed a little. Until now, I’d never been able to get nicely scented cosmetics — they were too expensive. So I’d gotten a little carried away, and then I’d been worried that I’d done something wrong. Thank goodness it wasn’t a problem.

“Still...” Sir Celes said, just as I’d calmed down, and then casually said something that turned my world upside down: “I suppose I’m just jealous that you’re wearing perfume from another guy.”

Lucia is Confused

Wait. What did he just say!?

Something had to be wrong with my ears. I felt like I'd just been told something that could be given an incredibly convenient interpretation. Getting jealous over the hair oil I'd been given by Sir Fedele... Wait, wait just a minute! My mind was jumping to conclusions here!

That, maybe, could it be... At the very least, could that mean that Sir Celes saw me, not as a friend, but as a woman?

No no no! Stop that, I have to calm down. Maybe he meant something else.

Q: I'd been told that he felt jealous because I was wearing perfume that another man had given to me as a present.

A: He didn't want someone to steal the giver away.

That was it! It wasn't that he didn't want *me* to be stolen away... No, wait, that didn't fit. If that were the case, if he were jealous that I had been given a gift, then he would have mentioned Sir Fedele's name, right?

Huh? There had to be some other answer... Oh no, my head was spinning so fast, I couldn't think!

"Lucia."

Eep! Stop that, don't whisper in my ear like that! Not right now! Don't grin like this is funny!

"You're so cute when you blush."

Of course! He'd said that just to see my reaction! That was it! He was just teasing me!



Because if he wasn't.

If he really saw me as a woman.

If that was the case, then I...

I would have a name for the feelings in my chest.

I enjoyed spending time with him. I couldn't wait for those clear, bright days. When I'd been terrified, calling his name in my heart had given me the strength to keep going. I'd been so happy when he praised me. I was glad that we could meet again, that we could travel together.

Oh, but...but.

Making up my mind, I started, "Sir Celes—"

"We're about to reach the next town!" Sir Agliardi called.

Startled, I looked up and saw the walls of a town just ahead of us.

"Already? Shame." Sir Celes leaned back a little bit, giving me a little more space.

I didn't know if I was disappointed or relieved.

And so I entered the town of Amarith, the words I'd been about to say to Sir Celes unsaid.



"Luuuuciiiiiaaaa!"

When we had arrived at the inn where we would stay for the night, Miss Maria dashed out of the carriage towards me and grabbed my hands. "Stay with me tonight! In my room!"

"Miss Maria!" Her happy smile was utterly charming. It was no wonder His Highness was head over heels for her! I could relate.

"Celes, I'm taking Lucia back now!" Winding her arm through mine, Miss Maria began to pull me along with her. She was much stronger than I'd expected! "We'll have a pajama party! And we'll eat together! Oh, I wonder if they have baths here." Enthusiastically, Miss Maria turned to Sir Agliardi. "Hey,

Fer, is there a bath here!?”

“Inns with private bathing facilities are only found in cities like Arldat,” he told her. “Generally towns only have public bathhouses. But given the safety concerns, I don’t think...”

Private baths were available at inns where nobles and wealthy families and the like stayed, but generally everyone went to the public baths in the center of town. Amarith was not a particularly big city, so it wouldn’t have an inn with baths.

“It’ll be fine, Lucia will be with me! Don’t be so stingy! I want to take a bath every day! I’m bearing with it while we travel, but you can’t just say it’s too dangerous every time! I’m not a baby. If anything happens, I’ll blast it away with magic!” Miss Maria argued.

The commander shook his head. “Nevertheless...”

“Eh, what’s the big problem, Commander?” Sir Gaius interrupted. “Her Sacredness isn’t used to traveling; bet she’s tired. Let her live a bit. Little lady, if anyone causes you trouble, hit them with a soap bubble. That should keep things in line.”

Sir Gaius was as kind as ever. But...we didn’t know if humans would calm down the way monsters did when I cast Soap on them. Soap had certainly improved Miss Maria’s mood, but I didn’t think we could say for sure that would always be the case. “But we don’t know that it works on people that way...” I started.

“It’ll be fine. Look at what happened with Her Sacredness.”

“What? You are such a rude bear!” Miss Maria huffed.

“See? Try casting it on Her Sacredness now,” Sir Gaius suggested. “Should fix up that temper a bit.”

“Shut up, you bear!” Miss Maria stuck her tongue out at Sir Gaius, then attached herself to me again. “Hey, Lucia, let’s *go*. You’ll protect me, right?”

She looked up at me with huge, glistening eyes. How could I possibly say no when she pleaded like that?

“Oh, let’s try an experiment then!” Eric suggested breathlessly, breaking into our negotiations. He looked like he was having great fun.

“And who would we be experimenting on?” Lord Reynard asked. “This isn’t the Academy, Master Eric.”

“You sound like one of the teachers, Reynard. Still, don’t you think it’s important to try it out?”

“Gaius has a point,” the prince interrupted. “Maria, go on. It’s all right, right, Fernando?”

“Awww. You get it, Ed! Thanks! I love that part of you!”

At the prince’s declaration, a resigned look crossed Sir Agliardi’s face, but Miss Maria had her permission to visit the public baths.

“I want dinner, but baths first!” Miss Maria declared, and then we set out for the public bathhouse. It had separate areas for men and women, so the two of us separated from the rest of our group there.

There weren’t too many people in the bathhouse; we must have arrived before the truly busy period. In the changing room, we pulled off our clothes and left them in the baskets, and put on bathrobes that opened in the front — according to Miss Maria, they were very similar to something called yukata in her homeland.

“This is a bit like a Japanese public bath,” she said. “Or...maybe not? It’s a little different.”

“It is?” I asked, handing over my basket and receiving a tag to wear around my neck in return.

“Putting our clothes in a basket, that part’s the same. But here, you hand them over for safekeeping. Back home, we’d leave them in the changing room.”

As we talked, Miss Maria and I headed for the bathing room.

“Wait, where is the bath!?” she cried in surprise.

Immediately on entering was a place where you could wash yourself before soaking, but you could also get massages or loofas there; it wasn’t the actual

bath. It was a big room, with hot water pipes running under the tiled floor to warm it.

Apparently, Miss Maria found that quite surprising. “Heated floors! And...they do beauty treatments here? Wait, where are the dividers?”

“Is this your first time visiting a public bathhouse, Miss Maria?” I asked.

“Of course it is! This is completely different from the castle. Oh, this is exciting!”

“Well then, let’s get washed up and then we can go soak,” I suggested.

We found an open washing spot in one corner of the washroom. I filled my bucket with hot water from the spout and began cleaning myself.

“Do you just...leave it running?” Miss Maria asked.

“Eh? I mean, it’s always flowing...”

“Where I come from, you turn it off unless you need it. Isn’t this wasteful?”

“They use magic to provide the water, so I never really thought about it...” I admitted.

“This world of yours is so careless. It’s inefficient!”

“Being able to stop and start it whenever you wanted would require separate magic stones. That isn’t efficient, either.”

“Hmph.” Miss Maria upended her bucket over her head, dousing herself. Then she smirked — and that mischievous, childlike grin was even more impressive on her beautiful face! “But seriously, you’re pretty fair-skinned, aren’t you. You’re just really tanned on your arms and face.”

Miss Maria, you’re one to talk about fair skin! Her skin was smooth and white all over, without a single blemish, as if she’d never once been out in the sun. It was enough to make me jealous.

I had just finished washing and was pulling my bathrobe back on when Miss Maria reached out and pulled my robe open again. “And what is up with these!?”

“Ah! What are you doing? Stop that, you’re supposed to keep the robes

closed!”

“I bet those even float in the bath, don’t they. Augh, that’s not fair!”
Stubbornly holding my robe open, Miss Maria glared at my chest. *Seriously, stop that!*

“Anyway!” I said hastily. “Let’s go to the bathing room. Which would you prefer? The hot baths, the cold baths, or the sauna?”

“What, they have all of those? Anyway, I want a hot tub! I want to soak in hot water!”

“The hot baths, then. This way,” I said, and opened the door that was labeled “Hot Baths.” Warm air wafted against my face.

Miss Maria looked at the large tub and cheered. “It’s huge! Yes, this is what I wanted!”

She was pleased! Thank goodness.

“Let’s get in!” she said eagerly. “Everyone’s dressed like this, so we just get in as we are?”

“Yes, just as we are.”

“Yes! A bath at last! Oh, I’ve been wanting this for so long... No matter where we went, it was always just hot water in a pail and things like that. I’m so sick and tired of it. Men do not get it at all! I want to take a bath every day!”

“You really like bathing, don’t you?” I commented.

“Of course I do! Are you really okay with not taking a bath every day? I’ve been wondering, do you people even have a sense of hygiene? I mean, I’ll grant that this bathhouse is cleaner than I’d thought, but it’s kind of dim, and... Well, I’ll grant that it does feel wonderful.” Miss Maria let out a long sigh, as though she was trying to empty her lungs of air.

I exhaled softly as well. I could feel the fatigue from the day seem to melt away into the hot water as I soaked.

“So, how did things go with Celes?” Miss Maria asked.

“Oh, we sorted everything out! Did you get the prince to spoil you a bit, Miss

Maria?”

“What are you talking about! I’m not a child, he’s not spoiling me! All that’s a secret!”

“I don’t think there’s anything to be ashamed of about having a man spoil you a bit?”

“What, and you don’t get embarrassed?”

Chatting with Miss Maria as we soaked in the hot water, I found myself thinking back to Hasawes for some reason. I hadn’t had any money, but I’d had many friends my own age. *How are they doing?*, I wondered.

Still...I really did think that spending time with someone like this was what it meant to be happy.

“You know...it’s nice, hanging out with someone like this,” Miss Maria commented.

“It really is,” I said with a nod. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

I received a soft, happy smile in response. It was so wonderful to be on the same wavelength as someone!

“Oh, hey!” Miss Maria said, still smiling happily. “When we get out, cast that spell on me again. Your *Soap*.”

Why would she need *Soap* if we’d been in the baths? “But...you’re already clean?” I said, puzzled. “We just washed ourselves.”

“Those are completely different things! Got it! This is an order!” Miss Maria countered instantly. But even as she tried to make herself seem stern, I could see the corners of her mouth twitching.

This Sacred Maiden from another world was so very cute.

Lucia Worries Alone

By the time we left the baths, everyone else was waiting for us.

“Sorry to make you wait!” I called.

“They’re men, it’s their job to wait,” Miss Maria said.

Huh? Where are His Highness and Sir Agliardi? I wondered. The only ones waiting for us were Sir Celes, Sir Gaius, Lord Reynard, and Eric.

Apparently, Miss Maria had thought the same thing. “Huh? Where are Ed and Fer?” she asked, looking around.

“Sir Agliardi accompanied His Highness to the inn ahead of us,” Lord Reynard said. “Now, Sacred Maiden, Miss Lucia — shall we go?”

“Yeah. Sheesh, girls take so long,” Eric complained.

“Come on, little lady!” Sir Gaius added. “Can’t fight on an empty stomach. Time for some grub!”

Yes, let’s go quickly! I thought.

“Celes!” Before we could start walking, Miss Maria, who’d been next to me, latched onto Sir Celes’s neck. She leaned in towards his ear and seemed to whisper something. For a moment, Sir Celes looked shocked, and then his face turned bright red.

Miss Maria, what did you tell him?

Chuckling, Miss Maria let go and grabbed my hand. “Later, Celes! Lucia, let’s go!”

“Ah, yes’m...”

Still wondering about the red-faced Sir Celes, I was pulled after Miss Maria as we began to walk. But for some reason, my chest hurt. It was an odd shock, like suddenly being doused with cold water. When I glanced at Sir Celes, I discovered that he was looking at me...but the moment our eyes met, he

suddenly looked away.

Eh? Why? What happened? I was confused. I mean, we'd been talking so normally just a little while ago, right? Was it something I did? Maybe he hadn't wanted me to see Miss Maria holding him like that...?

"Lucia, hurry up! What's wrong?"

"Oh... It's, it's nothing."

Still with that uncomfortable feeling in my chest, I followed after Miss Maria, heading for the inn.

While Sir Gaius and I were traveling and stopped at an inn, we'd generally eaten in the inn's common room or at food stands in the town, but now everyone ate in their own rooms. I suppose it would be difficult for His Highness, who'd been raised in the palace, to eat with everyone else. As a result, Miss Maria and I ate dinner together.

"Have you eaten alone until now?" I asked. That seemed unpleasant.

"Oh, I ate with Ed," Miss Maria said nonchalantly.

Wait. Did that mean that the prince was eating alone right now!? "Then, shouldn't you be eating with His Highness?" I asked.

Miss Maria started to reach for her fork. "Well, for today... Oh, right!" she exclaimed, as if she'd suddenly remembered something. "Sorry, do you mind if I eat in Ed's room tonight? I need to tell him something!"

"Oh — yes. Yes, of course!"

"All right! I'll just wheedle him into letting us eat together starting tomorrow! Okay, Lucia? Sorry about tonight!"

"It's quite all right!" I said lightly.

Miss Maria picked up the tray with her dinner and ran for His Highness's room, her footsteps echoing in the hallway. She was going to spill her soup, running like that!

After she left, the room was very quiet. Alone, I lifted a spoonful of soup to

my mouth. The potato potage was certainly delicious but...for some reason, my stomach felt heavy, and I couldn't make myself keep eating.

I knew why. Sir Celes.

"I wonder...if Sir Celes is in love with Miss Maria." The moment the words left my mouth, my chest tightened painfully. I was so ashamed of myself, getting carried away just because he'd treated me like a girl.

He might just have blushed because Miss Maria was holding him. It didn't necessarily mean he was in love with her. But, Miss Maria was charming and pretty; anyone who looked at her could see she was a beauty. I was ordinary, I just happened to be his friend. If someone were to ask who he would fall in love with...I had the feeling it wouldn't be me.

"Stop that! This isn't the time to be moping!" Shaking my head fiercely to chase thoughts of Sir Celes away, I put my spoon down. I wasn't hungry at all, so I might as well take a walk outside to clear my head.



Amarith was lively at night. Magically-powered lamps were set here and there along the main street, making it relatively bright.

I walked along the slightly uneven cobblestone streets, not really thinking about anything. The main street in the capital had beautiful mosaics, but here it was regular stones. Hasawes had been the same way. It made me feel a little nostalgic.

By this hour, only the restaurants and taverns were open, but everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was good that people were so lively.

As I walked aimlessly, someone suddenly grabbed my shoulder. "Misshy, you 'lone?"

When I turned around, an unfamiliar man was grinning at me. I could smell the alcohol on him, but it seemed he was a happy drunk.

"Yes, just out for a walk," I said.

"Bein' 'lone is dangerous. Com'n drink with me!" he laughed.

"Thank you, but I can't drink yet," I told him. "You seem very drunk, sir. You

should probably drink some water.”

“Wateeeeeer!” He laughed even more.

“I think there was a public well in the plaza. Can you make it there?”

“Come with meeee. ‘Kay?”

...Oh dear. He was completely drunk.

And he had also completely latched onto me. He’d leaned in to embrace my shoulders, so I couldn’t move! He was heavy...!

“Sir, you’re too heavy! I can’t hold you up! Please walk yourself!”

He laughed raucously again. “Don’ wanna! Let’sh drink! My treat!”

“I told you, I’m too young to drink!”

“But ’sh so goood. It’sh even better wi’ a girl to sherve! Lucky!”

Oh, I shouldn’t have gone for a walk! Kicking myself wouldn’t help matters, but there wasn’t much I could do at this point. The capital normally had members of the Fifth Regiment on patrol; I’d gotten careless.

Pulling my hand, the drunken fellow started to go somewhere. *I’m not going!*

Wait. If I cast *Soap* on him, would that help? It might just clean his clothes, but it almost might clear his head a little... Maybe. It was possible.

I clenched my free hand tightly. “*Soa—*”

Suddenly a hand reached around from behind me, covering my mouth. Startled, I whirled around and...there were Sir Gaius and Lord Reynard. Sir Gaius was the one covering my mouth.

“Sorry ’bout this,” he said, “but I don’t suppose you’d leave my daughter alone?”

“Wha’ was tha’!”

“Ooo, you picking a fight? Happy to oblige!”

“Brother, please don’t cause trouble in the middle of our journey. Miss Lucia, come with us.” Lord Reynard wrenched my hand out of the man’s grip and started walking, leaving Sir Gaius behind.

Lord Reynard, are you sure leaving Sir Gaius is a good idea?

“Sir Gaius! Please give that man some water to drink!” I called. “He seems to be very drunk!”

Sir Gaius flapped a hand idly, not bothering to turn around. “Gotcha. Now then, Mister, shall we go chat over there...?”

Looking like he was enjoying himself immensely, Sir Gaius started walking with the drunken man towards the plaza. He...wasn't planning on going off drinking, was he?

“Don't worry. He'll be right back,” Lord Reynard said kindly. Apparently he had noticed my worry. Then he let go of my hand. “However, why are you out here alone?”

“Miss Maria went to eat with His Highness, so I... Well, I wanted a little fresh air...”

“It's not wise for a woman to go walking alone,” Lord Reynard told me. “A short while ago, we learned that there has been a string of attacks on vulnerable women recently, here in Amarith. In the future, speak to someone first. I'm sure if you went to Master Celestino, he would be delighted to accompany you.”

“...I'll be careful.” I'd messed up. And I'd caused them trouble. “I apologize for the inconvenience. Thank you for helping me.”

Lord Reynard pushed his glasses up with a finger, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards slightly. “Not at all. I'm just glad we happened to be passing by.”

He was certainly right about that. Thank you, coincidence! I'd wondered what to do if that man had managed to drag me off drinking. Given that I didn't have any money, I would truly have been at a loss.

“Little lady!” At the same time as the voice, a fist dropped on top of my head.

By this point, it was a familiar sensation. “Sir Gaius!”

“What did you think you were doing, wandering about like that? This place isn't exactly Arldat!”

“I’m sorry!”

“What do you think would’ve happened if we hadn’t passed by? Don’t overestimate yourself. A woman walking alone around this town right now is practically asking for her life to be ruined!” he said hotly. “Also...I might have joked about it this afternoon, but actually? Don’t use that magic where people will see you. Casting it *after* something has happened is too late.”

“After something...?”

Sir Gaius took his hand off my head, then wrapped an arm around my neck. It was almost as if he was keeping me from running away. He didn’t have to do that, I wasn’t going anywhere!

I waited quietly for Sir Gaius’s scolding. Until now, I’d been assuming that *Soap* didn’t hurt anyone. Could it be that it had a dangerous side?

“I was talking about this with Reynard, earlier,” he told me. “That magic of yours pulls people in. You let loose with that flashy stuff, next thing you know someone’s going to take a liking to you and drag you off. Then what?”

“You mean the soap bubbles?” I asked.

“Her Sacredness was all over you after you cast it on her, right? That sort of obsession is dangerous. Kidnapping someone’s easy. Honestly, watching Her Sacredness, I’m a little worried which way I’d go, if you cast that on me.”

At Sir Gaius’s words, Lord Reynard chuckled. “The Sacred Maiden has distinctly changed since you came. She was constantly on edge before. I admit, any power that can influence *that* Sacred Maiden is cause for concern!”

Put that way, they did have a point. Miss Maria truly did seem taken with me. I couldn’t say for certain that the same wouldn’t happen with other people.

“Well, anyway,” Sir Gaius said. “Watch it when you use that on people. It might make them less hostile, but it might make them obsessed with you.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promised. “Thank you for saving me.”

This really wasn’t the time for fluttering over this and that. I braced myself once again. Once we finished purifying the Cristallo Sacro, there would be fewer monsters. This was an important journey I was participating in. I needed to get

it together!

“Well then, might as well head back,” Sir Gaius said.

“But weren’t you on an errand?” I asked. “Are you sure?”

“Can hardly take you to a tavern, little lady.”

“I can...”

“Miss Lucia, please don’t say you can return alone,” Lord Reynard said. “It truly is dangerous right now.”

“Yes, sir... I’m sorry for the trouble...”

And so, I returned to the inn, escorted by the brothers.

Side Story: Celestino Hastens to Secure His Position

Being the Sacred Maiden's escort — that is, guarding her as we traveled — was, honestly, a headache.

There's an icky bug! I'm tired! My legs hurt! (You're riding in a carriage, for crying out loud!) *It's hot, it's cold* — she'd stop the carriage for every little thing. And slow up the entire expedition in the process. It felt like we were making no progress at all.

With His Highness infatuated with the Sacred Maiden, there was no rebuke coming from that quarter. And even the Knight Commander, who was in charge of the expedition, never said anything. Luckily, we never ran into any particularly dangerous monsters, but every time a monster did show up, the lady would fly into a rage and we would be stuck bending over backwards to try and soothe her.

When they announced that they would be sending back the soldiers who had set out with us, along with the attendants meant to see to the Sacred Maiden's comfort, Lord Reynard and I both advised strongly against it. But His Highness and the Sacred Maiden refused to change their minds, leaving only myself, the Knight Commander, and Master Eric to protect everyone.

Saying we were the best of the best was all well and good. But it left a cold feeling in my gut. With such small numbers, if a dragon or some other monster of that level showed up it would all be over for us. I seriously had no idea what they were thinking.

That day, a monster had appeared just as we'd paused for a rest. Phaian boars were fairly common monsters in this region, but the Sacred Maiden had never encountered one before, and she was unaccustomed to fighting. She panicked, grabbed onto me, and would not let go. So I'd cut the boar down with her still clinging to me, but some of the blood had gotten onto her dress. After the panic had passed, the Sacred Maiden was furious.

That was when I heard a man cheer, "Ho, looks like we've finally caught up!"

And when I turned to look...there was Lucia, who should have been safely in Arl dat.

By the time it occurred to me to wonder why, I was already running. Abandoning the charge I should have been protecting and dashing off to someone else...I deserved a rebuke for that. But I couldn't think. Like a starving dog that had just found food, I ran to see if she was really real.

"Sir Celes!?"

It wasn't an illusion. It was really Lucia, staring wide-eyed at me, the bright sunlight bringing out a glimpse of the true color of her normally near-black eyes. That mysterious amethyst color, usually hidden, brought to mind rare and precious gemstones.

Helping her down from the horse, I demanded, "Lucia, what are you doing here!?"

Lucia only stared at me. As for why...I could guess. That's right, I'd never told her my real name. As I watched, she paled.

"Lucia?" I called, tightening my grip on her hand, but she didn't react. What could I do? Would she hate me now? Surely not, not after all the time we'd spent together! But...

The big bear of a man she'd been riding with interrupted. "Oi. Lucia."

Lucia started, finally seeming to remember herself. "...Oh! Right!" Hastily, she snatched her hand back from mine. It was so adorable.

Still. Who was this bear guy, anyway? I eyed the man treating Lucia so cavalierly. I'd seen his face before. If I recalled correctly, he was a member of the Fourth Regiment.

"Lucia..." I started.

"Say, didn't you have a message from the guys in the Third?" the bear-man said, interrupting me.

"Oh, right! Um, Sir Celes." Lucia's voice was music to my ears, after not hearing it for days. She turned to me, and innocently gave me the earth-shattering message she'd brought from the capital.

“They asked me to tell you, ‘Everyone awaits your return’... Hey! Sir Gaius, why are you laughing!?”

The bear-man had burst into laughter. “Don’t forget the rest of it, Lucia. They also said, ‘Brace yourself, Cap’n.’”

Now I remembered. He was Lord Reynard Canalis’s older brother. From the rumors, he was an oddball who’d bounced around between all the regiments except for the First: he was certainly powerful, but had too many bad habits. That certainly fit what I saw now. He had the air of someone who couldn’t be handled by ordinary means.

On the other hand... I let out a silent sigh. It seemed the others had finally found out about Lucia’s presence. And that I’d been hiding that fact from them.

This made it all the more important that I get Lucia’s attention as fast as possible. It seemed that thus far, she’d only thought of me as a friend. If she returned to Arldat like this, there would be all sorts of people interfering with our time together. I didn’t want that. I wouldn’t let go of the peaceful time I spent with her by my side!

While I’d been thinking, Lucia had, with her usual gentle manner, been acquainting herself with the other members of the expedition. The real surprise was the Sacred Maiden. The headstrong, self-centered Sacred Maiden who’d constantly complained about her attendants while flattering all the men seemed to be absolutely fascinated by Lucia’s magic.

She wasn’t the only one. Naturally, Master Eric — who was a researcher at the Academy, after all — clearly was intrigued by Lucia. Or at least, Lucia’s odd magic. I wanted to believe he wasn’t interested in Lucia herself. He was obsessed with magic to the point of mania. He was always pestering the Sacred Maiden to let him take measurements or loitering around myself or the commander, since we could both use some magic. Surely his interest in Lucia was the same.

Please let it be the same. I really did not need any romantic rivals.

And this was no time for woolgathering! Urgently, I grabbed Lucia’s arm.



Lucia was here because she had discovered a new effect of her magic.

Apparently, after we had set out on our quest, monsters had attacked Arldat. Lucia had desperately used her *Soap* to protect herself, and that magic had saved both her and the capital.

But what were they thinking, sending an untrained girl with only one escort!? Other than her ability to make monsters calm, she was a completely ordinary girl! Listening to Lucia, I could feel the blood draining from my face. Maybe she'd driven away the monsters once, but that was no reason to send Lucia out practically alone. At the very least, they should have sent a group of soldiers to accompany her until she caught up with the expedition, or a few knights. *And I'm not forgiving Blitz.* Trying to cozy up to her while I was away...!

As I fumed, one by one the others started talking to her; first the bear, then Lord Reynard, then Eric and the others. And then, as the final blow, the Sacred Maiden arrived — and took Lucia away with her.

Wait, why was everyone flocking around Lucia? True, she had a presence that made it soothing just to be near her. I could understand wanting that. But I never expected that even that difficult Sacred Maiden would take a liking to her...

"I treated a dear friend very badly."

When Lucia returned from the Sacred Maiden's carriage, she shattered my world all over again. *How do you keep doing this to me, Lucia?* It was like being stabbed through the heart.

A friend. I'd suspected as much. It seemed that she didn't really see me as a *man*. Gods, what a disappointment. On the other hand, if I was dear to her, then I still had a chance.

First, I had to get her to look at me properly. Maybe it was just her sweet nature, but Lucia could be a little dense. Consider the fact that we had been good friends for months, and she'd never figured out that I was Celestino Clementi. If all I did was hint at my feelings, it would never get through.

Which meant I'd wasted the past several months...no, now was not the time

to be depressed. Now was the time to get to the heart of the matter. When I tried expressing my feelings bluntly, I got a reaction she'd never shown before. She was so cute when she blushed.

This might work, I thought, and decided to keep pushing.

Honestly, I was a little desperate. Knowing I had to capture her heart before we returned to Arl dat was more pressure than I'd expected.

I asked the bear — that is, Lord Reynard's brother — to let Lucia ride with me. At the time, I'd only been thinking that I wanted to talk to her as long as I could, but...I might have miscalculated.

What is this torture! This was so much harder than simply sitting next to her!

With Lucia in my arms, I noticed a very faint scent of fresh flowers that she hadn't had before. When I asked, she told me it had been a gift from Blitz. It was a soft, sweet smell, one that suited the gentle Lucia very well. It suited her, and yet...I was not pleased.

And on the theme of being displeased — when we reached the town of Amarith, where we'd planned to stay for the night, I wasn't even able to talk to Lucia. There was just one reason for that: the Sacred Maiden, who really had taken a liking to Lucia, was monopolizing her and wouldn't leave! No matter how much I wanted to be with her, I couldn't.

Then, just when they'd finally left the public bathhouse, the Sacred Maiden pounced on me.

"Celes!" Wrapping her arms around my neck like a child, the Sacred Maiden turned a bright, full-faced smile towards me. Perhaps being with Lucia had eased her heart; it was the first genuinely relaxed expression I'd ever seen from her.

Was there a reason for her constant tantrums, perhaps? Until now, I'd only seen her in a fury, or turning false smiles on people she wanted to flatter. It was honestly a shock to see her without that harsh expression. This more natural expression made the Sacred Maiden's delicate beauty far more charming.

Now that I thought about it, the Sacred Maiden was sixteen. She wasn't even an adult yet, but this girl had been suddenly torn away from her parents and forced to live in a strange world. It must have been stressful. In her own way, the Sacred Maiden had been doing her best, all this time.

It was the first time I'd ever considered it: even if she'd been a little self-centered — well, no, definitely more than *a little* — how much more self-centered were we, for summoning her from another world and demanding that she cleanse our world for us? It made me feel ashamed, both as a knight and as someone who lived in this world. We'd been so inconsiderate.

...Then the Sacred Maiden herself smashed my apologetic feelings. Smiling, she leaned in to whisper in my ear, "Since you've been so cold, Sir Celes, I have a little present for you. Did you know, Lucia's skin is snow-white under her clothes? And her breasts float in the bath. They're very large, after all. I bet you'd love to get a look. Well, *I* got a good, long look. I bet you'd like to *touch*? Well, I'm going to touch all I want!"

I choked. What was she saying!?

She chuckled at me. "Later, Celes! Lucia, let's go!"

"Ah, yes'm..."

Grinning in satisfaction at my reaction, the Sacred Maiden took Lucia and set off to where Prince Edoardo was waiting. As they passed, I met Lucia's eyes...and then realized I was about to look somewhere I really shouldn't, so I reflexively turned away. I don't think anyone can blame me for that.

Curse you, Sacred Maiden. *I did not need to know that!*

Lucia Does Laundry to Calm Herself

“I’m so sorry to have bothered you. Thank you for seeing me back,” I told the brothers when we arrived back at the inn.

“Not at all,” Lord Reynard told me. “I’m simply glad nothing happened to you.”

“Besides, I can go drinking anytime,” Sir Gaius said cheerfully. “The night’s long, so don’t you worry about it, little lady. Now, spring might be here, but the nights are still cold. Hurry back to your room.”

After they saw me off, Sir Gaius and Lord Reynard turned and headed back into town. *Sir Gaius, it’s not good to drink too much!*

When I returned to our room, Miss Maria still hadn’t returned. I decided to finish eating dinner before she got back. By then it had gone cold, but I still quickly filled my stomach. I was hardly going to waste it. Besides, the fried fish was still delicious, even if not warm.

As I tidied the dishes, I made up my mind. This was not the time to be fretting over Sir Celes’s and Miss Maria’s behavior. I would be lying if I said it didn’t bother me, but I would do my best to ignore it, and aim to treat both of them as normal. And as for the unsettled feeling in my heart — I would wash it away with the laundry!

I borrowed a tub and washboard from one of the inn staff, picked up some soap and a bit of the laundry, and went to the garden patio. It was paved with stone, and there was a well with a pump in the center. The public well in the plaza used a magic stone to easily produce water, but here you had to draw the water up from the well. It made me feel a little nostalgic; there weren’t any wells like this in the capital, but they’d been common in Hasawes.

I filled the tub with water and put the laundry in to soak. It would be easy to wash everything with *Soap*, but I did like doing it by hand. Seeing something that you could make clean with your own hands was such a refreshing feeling!

For a while, I focused completely on the laundry. Even with the light from the magical lamps, doing laundry at night made dirt and stains hard to see. Still, I wanted to do laundry right now. I wanted to simply immerse myself in the work, without thinking about useless things. I wanted to watch the dirt wash away and leave things clean and white, and to clear my own head in the process. Besides, once it was washed, I could always hang it up in the room to dry.

I was wringing out the last of the laundry when suddenly I heard a voice behind me, “Miss Lucia.”

I started and turned, to find Sir Agliardi standing there. Hastily, I wrapped the laundry up in a cloth. Most of it was underwear — not something you want to show people.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “...Ah, laundry?”

“Yes, my lord,” I said. “I thought it would be good to wash it while we had a place to hang it up.”

“You aren’t cleaning it with magic? I thought your magic could remove any stain.”

“I only use *Soap* on things that won’t come out any other way,” I told him.

“Really?” Commander Agliardi’s bright green eyes sparkled with interest. The faint wrinkles at the corners of his eyes were kind. “So even though you have such a useful magic, you don’t use it.”

“That’s right. I would rather not depend on magic...and I like doing laundry.”

“You like it?”

“Oh, yes! It feels good, to know you can clean something with your own hands. It’s refreshing. And it’s a chance to clear my head.”

Sir Agliardi laughed with a clear, carrying voice. “That’s good. It’s certainly far better than expecting magic to fix everything.” With a final, “Come inside soon; you don’t want to catch a cold,” he left.

I was done with the laundry, so I’d best head back to the room myself!



Maria still hadn't returned to our room. Perhaps she and His Highness were deep in conversation and lost track of time?

At least, that was what I thought as I hung up the clean laundry to dry. But when one hour passed, and then two, I began to get worried. No matter how deep in conversation they were, wasn't this much too late? Well, I supposed sweethearts would find it hard to be parted, maybe.

However, given that we would be setting out again in the morning, I thought that it was probably about time to go to bed.

Looking at Miss Maria's bed, still tidy, I made up my mind. I might be intruding, but I thought I should at least go and check on them. And if Miss Maria said she still wanted to continue talking with His Highness, then I would make my apologies and ask permission to go to bed first.

Decided, I stepped out of the room and headed for where His Highness and Sir Agliardi were staying. But when I went to knock on the door, I hesitated. After all, His Highness, the Sacred Maiden, and the Knight Commander were all inside. I wasn't sure if I really should disturb them.

As I stood fidgeting in front of the door, someone said, "What's wrong? Did you need to speak to His Highness or the commander?"

I didn't have to turn to see who it was. I knew Sir Celes's voice.

"Well, Miss Maria still hasn't come back... She said that she would be taking dinner with His Highness and came here, but it's getting late and I was a little worried," I said.

At my explanation, Sir Celes's brow furrowed. "The Sacred Maiden? Here?"

I'm sorry. Of course he wouldn't be happy to learn that the woman he liked was spending a long time with another man. Trying to ignore the little sparks dancing in my chest, I turned to look at Sir Celes.

He fixed me with a hard, serious stare. "She hasn't come back all evening?"

"That's right." I nodded.

Without the slightest hesitation, Sir Celes knocked sharply on the door in front of us.

Sir Agliardi opened the door. “Who’s there...Celestino? What’s wrong? And Miss Lucia as well.”

I went cold all over. He must have been getting ready for bed; he wasn’t wearing his uniform, just a simple shirt.

I didn’t know him very well, but at the very least, I could not imagine him being dressed so casually in the presence of both His Highness and Miss Maria, who he was meant to protect.

Sir Celes must have had the same feeling. In a voice tight with tension, he said, “Commander, the Sacred Maiden is missing.”

In an instant, Sir Agliardi’s expression stiffened. “When was she last seen?” he asked.

“At dinnertime,” Sir Celes told him. “She said that she would take dinner with His Highness and came here. She has not returned since.”

As they talked, I was frozen with horror. What should I do? Where could Miss Maria have gone?

Lucia Searches for Maria

When we realized that Miss Maria had unexpectedly gone missing, the expedition fell into confusion.

Miss Maria was utterly irreplaceable. Without her, we couldn't purify the Cristallo Sacro. Everyone had learned that, when the summoning of the Sacred Maiden was declared. There was no one who could replace her.

So it had never occurred to us that there might be people who would attempt to abduct her. Only monsters would attempt to harm the Sacred Maiden...or so we had thought. Which made this realization even more of a shock.

"Dinnertime. So the last anyone saw her was about four hours ago, I'd say," Sir Gaius murmured darkly. His face was solemn, his usual lighthearted manner gone.

"I'm sorry. I should have said something sooner," I said.

As Miss Maria's roommate, I was responsible for the gravity of this situation. Even if she was only going to the prince's room, I should have made sure to see her safely there. I'd been lulled into a false sense of security because it was only a few rooms away, inside the inn. That had been irresponsible. At the very least, if I had checked with Sir Agliardi when we'd talked, we could have reacted sooner.

It hurt to think of Miss Maria. Here I'd said I would protect her. Was she frightened right now?

"Maria did come to my room. She came to ask if Lucia could ride in the carriage starting tomorrow, since she wanted her to stay close. She went back to her room about an hour later... Where could she have gone after that? Hopefully nothing frightening has happened to her, but...I should have escorted her back to her room." Emerald-green eyes shadowed, the prince bit his lip and grimaced. His usual laid-back smile had vanished. Now he had the face of a man worried for the safety of his missing beloved.

“If it’s been three hours, then it’s possible she’s left the town,” Sir Celes noted.

“But, you can run into monsters outside the town,” Eric immediately countered, holding a bag of magic stones. “And it’s nighttime already. There aren’t any of the kingdom’s carriages running at this hour, so wouldn’t she have limited options for traveling? Plus, I’ve got the magic stones we’ve been using. The Sacred Maiden didn’t take any of them.”

Outside of the kingdom’s official carriages, the only ones who could afford carriages with warding against monsters were the very wealthy, such as nobles and large merchant houses. Monster-warding magical stones increased drastically in cost with how effective they were, which put them far outside the reach of ordinary people. And to go outside town walls at night without a magic stone was beyond dangerous. You might encounter a monster in the daytime, yes, but the monsters that came out by night were often far more vicious. I couldn’t imagine that Miss Maria, who was so afraid of monsters, would go out at night without even taking a magic stone. Not of her own accord.

“That does make sense...” Lord Reynard agreed. “In which case, she must still be here in town. But I’ve heard that the town is not particularly safe right now. It would be very dangerous for the Sacred Maiden to go out alone.”

When Lord Reynard mentioned the security in Amarith, Sir Gaius grimaced, arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t like thinking about it, but it is possible. We don’t find her soon, Her Sacredness could be in danger.”

“But, would any of the townsfolk attack or kidnap the Sacred Maiden? I mean, she’s the Sacred Maiden,” Eric asked. “Without her, we can’t purify the Cristallo Sacro, right?”

“Worse case, there are plenty of scum who’d figure that it’s fine, so long as they don’t kill her. Particularly the sort of perverted trash hanging around here. Especially since Her Sacredness is pretty.”

For a moment, everyone fell silent, considering Sir Gaius’s words. Miss Maria was in danger. That was a crisis for our whole world. After all, Miss Maria was the only one who could purify the sacred trees.

Finally, Sir Agliardi broke the silence, “For now, we should verify the records

of who has left and entered the town. If it seems unlikely that the Sacred Maiden has left, then she may still be here in Amarith. Reynard, can I ask you to inquire at the gate? Gaius, go into the town and find out if anyone has seen her.”

“I will go as well,” Sir Celes said.

Of course. If you thought that someone you cared about might be in danger, you couldn’t simply sit around waiting; you would want to go save them yourself...

“Good thought. Gaius, focus on the taverns. Celestino, I want you to check the back streets. I suspect you’ll have better luck getting the women to talk to you.”

Lord Reynard, Sir Gaius, and Sir Celes all nodded briskly at Sir Agliardi’s commands, then turned and left the room.

“I’ll go as well,” said the prince, rising hastily as if to follow them.

“I will, too!” I said.

But Sir Agliardi stopped us. “Your Highness, you cannot go. We cannot afford for you to be in danger. Do not forget that, like the Sacred Maiden, you are irreplaceable. Miss Lucia, I want you to remain here as well. Eric, I’m sorry, but can you go borrow the innkeeper’s ledger?”

I wanted to do something to help Miss Maria. It hurt to just sit and wait. I’d hoped that Sir Agliardi would have instructions for me, but he simply turned me down. Was there really nothing I could do?

Then Eric came to my rescue. “You can come with me to talk to the innkeeper, Lucia. That shouldn’t be a problem, right, Commander? Besides, it’ll be easier to protect his Highness alone, right?”

The prince glowered balefully at Eric, but Eric simply grinned back at him and offered his hand to me.

“Very well. Meet back here in an hour,” Sir Agliardi ordered.

Eric and I hurried out of the room.

“Suppose we should see if she’s left the inn or not, first. Let’s check the entrance.” As he walked, Eric pulled on his robe. From the way his flame-red

hair was tousled in the back, he must have been sleeping. “But, seriously. The Sacred Maiden just causes one problem after another. I’m *tired*,” he mumbled, looking irritated.

It felt like he was waiting for me to agree, but...I didn’t feel like I could sympathize. Miss Maria hadn’t caused me any trouble.

“I don’t think she’s missing because she wants to be,” I said.

“You’d think. But with the way she’s been, I’m pretty sure she’d do just about anything if she thought it would get our attention. Seriously, this is such a pain.” Yawning, Eric glanced at me. “Before you got here, she was really awful. Honestly? If it weren’t my job, I wouldn’t have anything to do with her. Yeah, that power of hers is really interesting, but you know, I’ve got plenty of other stuff I can research. And I’m not interested in dealing with annoyances outside of my research.”

Stunned, I stopped short in the hallway. “Aren’t you worried?”



Noticing that I'd stopped, Eric paused a few steps further down the hallway as well. His clear amber eyes studied me as he said, "Of course I am. We're in trouble if she's gone. What are we supposed to do about the Cristallo Sacro without her? But if it turns out that she decided to hide out somewhere and get a laugh out of us running around trying to find her, I'm going to be so ticked off."

"How can you say that...!"

"You're only saying that because she's never gone after you. You should ask the attendants who got sent back to the capital! She was constantly insulting them and threatening them, and she never let up!" The words exploded out of Eric like a dam bursting. "It was scary enough just watching her. And then when she got tired of screeching at them, she'd turn around and drape herself all over the rest of us. How am I supposed to trust someone like that? Does she get to do whatever she wants, just because she's pretty?"

Then, as if he thought that he might have gone too far, he huffed a little and looked away, lips pursed. "Look, I try to treat her nicely, because she's the Sacred Maiden. But I really kind of hate her. I know you get along with her, so you don't feel the same, but..."

The Sacred Maiden that Eric was describing seemed like a completely different person than the Miss Maria that I knew. In the back of my mind, I could see her crying. "*They only stand by me because I'm the Sacred Maiden,*" she'd wailed. Her voice had wavered as she cried that no one ever looked at *her*. She was just an ordinary girl like me, one who cried when she was scared. How could no one else understand that?

It wasn't that I knew Miss Maria all that well, but Eric's words were so harsh that I found myself saying, "That's... Certainly, her behavior may not have been the best. But I think the same could be said of us."

Hastily, I closed my mouth, but I couldn't take the words back.

"The same could be said of us?" Eric asked, puzzled. He stepped closer. "What do you mean?"

Eric and I were close to the same height, but his solemn amber eyes seemed

to be staring straight through me. It was a little intimidating.

“Well... We’re the ones who told Miss Maria, ‘you’re the Sacred Maiden, save us,’ aren’t we? We forced her to come here, to a strange world, and demanded so much from her. Doesn’t that make us the selfish ones?” I said.

“Huh... Yeah. You’re right.” Eric seemed to fall into thought.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know I don’t know much about it all...”

“Nah, it’s okay. Yeah...now that you mention it, you’re right. I never really thought about it that way before, but I just sort of assumed that of course it’s the Sacred Maiden’s job to purify the Cristallo Sacro. Augh! Darn it! Just making assumptions and only looking at one side of the problem — some researcher I am!”

Shoulders slumping, Eric sighed. Even his fire-bright hair seemed to droop.

“I’ll try to observe more carefully from now on, without letting bias get in the way,” he said. “Anyway... Let’s see, we were looking for the inn’s ledger, right? Shall we go borrow it?”

“Let’s!” I agreed.

Eric grinned sheepishly, the smile making his neat features light up.



When we descended from the second floor to the entryway on the first floor, we found several people, including the innkeeper, standing at the counter looking at each other with worried faces. Could this have something to do with Miss Maria’s disappearance?

When he saw me and Eric, the innkeeper quickly covered his worried expression with a warm, friendly smile. “Well, well, the Sacred Maiden’s companions! What can I do for you this evening?”

While I was trying to decide how to explain the situation, Eric jumped in with a bright smile. “Oh, we just had something we wanted to check... But, is something wrong?”

“Ah, well...”

I was older than Eric; I would be ashamed to leave this all to him. “Is something troubling you?” I asked.

Perhaps because both of us had asked, the innkeeper finally answered, his voice troubled: “Well...you see, a lad I employ as a servant has disappeared.”

Disappeared? Eric and I looked at each other. Someone had gone missing here as well? This couldn’t be a coincidence.

Lucia Investigates

“Could you describe him to us?” I asked urgently.

“His name is Ronnie. I’d say he’s probably a little older than you, miss.” The innkeeper looked at me. “Chestnut brown hair, curly, and amber eyes like my lord mage there. Forgive me for asking, but I don’t suppose you’ve seen him?”

Once again, we looked at each other. Had we seen such a person? I hadn’t, at least not since we’d arrived at the inn.

“You haven’t, I take it.” The innkeeper sighed. “Well, Ronnie works in the kitchen anyway. He doesn’t come out to where the guests are very often.”

Eric scratched his head, ruffling his hair. “When was he last seen?” he asked.

The innkeeper held his chin for a moment, tilting his head slightly. “I’d say...this evening, perhaps?”

“It was around dusk,” one of the other staff confirmed. “When I came to ask him to help set the tables, he was already gone.”

Miss Maria had disappeared around dinnertime. Ronnie had disappeared around dusk. Which meant that Ronnie had disappeared first.

If they had disappeared at the same time, it would have been possible that Ronnie took Miss Maria somewhere. But if he had disappeared first, then either the culprit was someone else, or they were completely unrelated incidents... We didn’t have enough information right now to be certain.

Brow furrowing, Eric asked, “Does Ronnie live here? Have you contacted his family?”

The innkeeper patted his generous belly as he replied, “All of my staff are live-in, Ronnie included. They’ve a day off every five days, but even if they sometimes spend the night elsewhere, none of them rent houses. They live here. Ronnie’s hometown — ah, what was it? They do say that memory’s the first to go as you get old. Ulisse, do you know?”

“Pretty sure he said it was Tello. You know, the food stall town.”

As I tried to hide my surprise at hearing the familiar name, the man the innkeeper had called Ulisse scratched his head and sighed. “Kid was always saying that when he’d made some money he’d go home to Tello and open a shop with Gisella. When I suggested he might as well open a shop here, he insisted he was going to go back to Tello.”

While I’d been distracted by the mention of Tello, Eric had taken an interest in the woman’s name they’d mentioned. “Gisella? Who’s that? What’s her connection to Ronnie?”

“Hm? Ah...Gisella’s Ronnie’s girl. She works for a merchant house that comes here often,” Ulisse answered. “Beautiful girl, type you don’t see out here in the country much.”

“If they’re lovers, maybe Ronnie is visiting Gisella?” Eric suggested.

The innkeeper and Ulisse looked at each other significantly. Then, in unison, they sighed, shoulders drooping.

“Well...about that.”

“In fact...Gisella went missing a few days ago.”

“What!?”

Another missing person! The innkeeper’s troubled expression deepened further; perhaps he’d noticed how we’d keyed in on the word “missing.” But Eric didn’t seem to notice the innkeeper’s expression, or perhaps didn’t care; he continued asking questions, “Do you think they eloped?”

“I doubt that,” the innkeeper said. “They were a fine couple, and the Gorgonne family — those are Gisella’s employers — weren’t particularly opposed to it, or so I heard. Neither Ronnie nor Gisella have parents. There’s not much reason to elope when there’s no one opposing the marriage.”

“Ronnie’s been awfully down since Gisella vanished,” Ulisse commented. “He even talked about quitting the job to go looking for her. That kid never was good at thinking about anything that wasn’t right in front of him... Maybe he took off to search.”

If someone important to you is suddenly gone... Feeling a chill running down my spine, I clenched my fists.

If they simply vanished, rather than dying, of course you would want to go looking for them. No matter what you left behind. If it was possible to get them back, of course you would want to, no matter what. Thinking of how Ronnie must have felt, I bit my lip.

Meanwhile, next to me, Eric recalled our assignment from Sir Agliardi and turned to the innkeeper. "Actually, we had a request to make. It seems His Highness wishes to look at the ledger... He would also like to speak to you. Could I ask you to accompany us?"

"Well, I don't..." The innkeeper hesitated. After all, we were asking him to produce the ledger that he normally wouldn't show even to his staff.

"Oh, and not just the ledger. We would also like to see the documents from when you hired Ronnie. Is that all right?"

I honestly thought he was going to say no, but to my surprise, he said reluctantly, "Well...normally I wouldn't be able to show you those. But if His Highness is willing to let me take them directly to him, I suppose I can make an exception."

"Great!" Eric cheered. "Then, sorry about this, but can we ask you to bring them immediately? It's a very urgent matter."



In no time at all, we were walking back to His Highness's room, accompanied by the innkeeper, his ledger in his hand. When we arrived, Sir Celes and the others had not yet returned, but Sir Agliardi and the prince were waiting for us.

"Ah, I see you brought the master himself. Have you explained the situation?" Sir Agliardi asked.

"Not yet," Eric explained. "I thought it might be better for you to do it."

"I see." In an instant, Sir Agliardi's hard expression was replaced by a kind smile, as he beckoned the hesitant innkeeper to enter the room. "I am sorry to put you to the trouble, good sir. This will be a somewhat complicated

discussion, so please, come in. You two as well,” he added, beckoning us to step inside quickly.

Once everyone was inside, Sir Agliardi led the innkeeper to sit on a sofa facing His Highness. Then Sir Agliardi sat on a third chair, so that the three of them formed three sides of a square, and immediately launched into the heart of the matter. “I must ask that you keep this a secret, but...the Sacred Maiden is missing.”

“What!?”

“We lost track of where she was after dinner,” Sir Agliardi explained. “Did you see her at the entrance? The door leading to the main road is the only way to get to and from the guestrooms, correct?”

“Ah — yes. That is correct,” the innkeeper replied. “There is a back door opening onto the alley that I and my staff use, but...well, to be honest, it’s not a very safe area, so we do not allow our guests to use it. We’ve occasionally had requests — there is a brothel nearby — but we always turn them down.”

So there was a back door? Come to think of it, the inn’s staff could hardly come and go through the same door that the guests used.

“I only watch the front door that the guests use, but since sunset, the only ones who have left the inn were members of your group, my lord. Two of the knights, and the young lady here.” The innkeeper glanced at where I stood in front of the door, next to Eric. I did remember him seeing me off when I stepped outside for some air.

“The ones who used the front would be Reynard and his brother,” Sir Agliardi murmured. “Then, if you know who has used the back entrance since this evening, could you tell us?”

“Including myself and my family, there are seven people who work here,” the innkeeper said. “But we don’t use it much in the evening. We’re too busy preparing dinner for our guests, you see. My wife might know, but...”

“In that case, forgive me, but could we check with her?”

“Ah... Yes, my lord...”

Sir Agliardi waved for the innkeeper to sit back down when he went to get up, and turned to Eric, who was yawning next to me. “Eric, I’m sorry, but could you call the lady? Lucia, stay here.”

“No problem. Oh, Lucia. Tell the commander about what we heard earlier. Thanks!” Waving a hand sleepily, Eric disappeared through the door.

Once he’d left, I explained what we’d learned to Sir Agliardi, “It seems that there are several other people who have disappeared in this town. One was Ronnie, who works at this inn. The other was Ronnie’s sweetheart Gisella. She vanished several days ago, and Ronnie disappeared this evening. Miss Maria seems to have been the most recent disappearance.”

They must have suspected that Ronnie and Gisella’s disappearances had something to do with Miss Maria’s. Both Sir Agliardi and the prince suddenly leaned forward.

“What do you mean?” Sir Agliardi asked sharply.

I explained as much as I could recall of the connection between Ronnie and Gisella, along with everything we knew thus far of the incident.

As I spoke, the innkeeper nodded. “As she said, my lords. Gisella disappeared three days ago. We only learned about it because her lover Ronnie asked my head cook Ulisse for time off suddenly. I don’t know if the Gorgonne family is keeping it quiet or what, but folks in town don’t seem to have heard any rumors about Gisella’s disappearance. She was a favorite of the head of the family, so I suppose if people heard about her disappearance, they’d suspect foul play.”

“I see...” Sir Agliardi trailed off into silence, deep in thought.

Two missing lovers. Could Miss Maria’s disappearance be connected to theirs, somehow?

Lucia is Left Holding the Fort

When Eric brought the innkeeper's wife back with him, Sir Agliardi listened to her words carefully, the furrow in his brow growing deeper and deeper.

After Lord Reynard left to see the couple off, the only ones left in the room were His Highness, Sir Agliardi, Eric, and myself.

"The Gorgonne Company, eh?" Sir Agliardi murmured.

Apparently, right around the time that Ronnie had disappeared that evening, a merchant had come to deliver some goods that had been ordered. Even more suspicious, when Lord Reynard returned shortly after, he reported that no one had seen the Sacred Maiden, and only the Gorgonne Company had passed through the gates.

Sitting next to me on the couch, Eric said what we were all thinking, half-yawning. "Honestly, they're pretty suspicious."

"You think so as well?" Sir Agliardi asked.

"Of course. I mean, for three people to disappear in that short a time, there's no way it's not connected. That merchant is fishy. The woman who disappeared, didn't they say she was really pretty? The Sacred Maiden might not have a great personality, but she's pretty, too."

I felt the same. Actually, probably all of us who'd heard the story were thinking it.

Slavery and human trafficking were forbidden in the kingdom of Banfield, but that didn't mean it didn't happen. In fact, I'd very nearly been sold as collateral to pay my debts, myself. In my case, I'd been lucky enough to have someone to refer me to my job as a laundrymaid, so I'd managed to escape that fate. But occasionally I heard stories of people who were sold due to debts, or were kidnapped by slavers to be sold as slaves, even if they were publicly called servants.

"Still, what Eric said before is true. Would anyone snatch the Sacred Maiden

— the one person who will save us all — as if she were an ordinary woman? If the Sacred Maiden is lost, the Cristallo Sacro can't be purified. Who would kidnap the Sacred Maiden, when that means we'll continue living in fear of monsters? It makes no sense." Sir Agliardi stared at the floor, head in his hands. "And yet, there is no reason for the Sacred Maiden to have disappeared on her own. The only explanation for her sudden disappearance that I can think of is that someone took her."

As he pondered, the door opened and Lord Reynard entered, Sir Celes and Sir Gaius behind him. "Commander. These two have learned of a disturbing rumor."

Sir Agliardi raised his face. "What is it?"

"It appears that there is a suspicious drug being traded on the black market."

"A drug?"

Lord Reynard nodded. "Yes. It seems to be largely used by prostitutes in brothels taking their first customers, or those who wish to force..." In the middle of his report, Lord Reynard noticed me sitting next to Eric on the couch and hastily cut his words short. "My apologies, perhaps we should not discuss this in front of a young lady..."

"Please, don't mind me. Keep going," I told him. "It might have something to do with Miss Maria." It was a little bit awkward, but Miss Maria was more important right now.

At my request, Lord Reynard coughed once, then continued his report, "It apparently paralyzes the limbs and induces a dream-like state of mind. So long as it is not used regularly, there are no extreme side effects, so it seems to be traded frequently."

"Do you know who sells it?" Sir Gaius asked.

"We do. No one was willing to point fingers directly, but when we consolidated our information, the primary seller in this town is..."

"The Gorgonne Company?"

Up until now, the prince had listened silently to everyone's reports, but now

he spoke. For a moment, Lord Reynard fell silent, taking in His Highness's dangerous expression. But then, as if making up his mind, he nodded.

"As you say, Your Highness," he replied. "We believe it to be the Gorgonne Company. They have a dedicated warehouse not far from here, although it is located away from the main roads. Either the Gorgonne family home or that warehouse — both strike me as suspicious."

"I see. Fernando, use whatever means you must." The prince's emerald green eyes glittered with rage. "Bring Maria back."

Sir Agliardi nodded. "As you command. We do not know for sure that the Gorgonne Company are the ones who took the Sacred Maiden, but we will begin our search there. Celestino, Gaius, go to the warehouse. I will investigate the main house. Reynard, protect His Highness. Eric and Lucia...please wait here. The hour is late, so you are welcome to sleep if you can."

So we were making a move now, in the middle of the night, rather than waiting for morning. But of course, the two of us presented a problem: I had no means of fighting, and Eric was too young. Even so, both of us stubbornly shook our heads.

"*Again!?* I'm going with you this time! I'm hardly going to sleep now, and if all I'm going to be doing is just sitting around the inn anyway, I might as well do something!" Eric insisted.

"I know I might be in the way, but isn't there something that I can do!?" I added.

"It's too dangerous for the two of you to go outside at this hour," Sir Agliardi said firmly. "I understand how you feel, but I want you to wait here in the inn."

We both argued, but Sir Agliardi would not yield. In the end, we were forced to agree and had to stay behind. I watched as Sir Celes and the others set out, now dressed in their uniforms, and couldn't do anything but pray.

Please, let Miss Maria be all right!

After we saw the knights off, Eric said with a yawn, "I'm going back to my room. There's nothing we can do here but sit around worrying. Lord Reynard,

you're good with watching His Highness on your own, right? Come on, Lucia."

"Yes, that might be a good idea," Lord Reynard agreed. "Miss Lucia, I know you may not be able to sleep, but at least try to rest a little."

So he said. I couldn't say I was happy with it. But I couldn't intrude on His Highness's room forever, so I decided I would at least return to my room.

Eric grabbed my wrist. "I'll walk you there," he said. "G'night, Your Highness, Lord Reynard."

Waving half-heartedly at the others, he led me out of the room. Even if he was one of the foremost of the Academy's mages, Eric was still a young boy. Staying up this late must have been hard on him. He'd been yawning constantly for a while now.

As we walked down the hallway towards my room, I admitted, "I'm...worried for Miss Maria."

Eric paused beside me. "So this does bother you?"

"Of course it does! If I could, I would go looking for her myself," I said unhappily.

As if he'd been waiting for those very words, that bright, sweet grin spread across Eric's face again. There wasn't a trace of the bleary sleepiness of only a moment ago.

"Then let's go, Lucia!"

"Eh?"

As I stared at him blankly, unable to understand what he was saying, Eric glanced around us and leaned close to whisper, "Let's sneak out and look for her. I can use magic, and you've got your *Soap*, right? Come on. I want to apologize to the Sacred Maiden."

"But, how?" I asked.

"Well, I'd been thinking of sneaking into the Gorgonne house, but if we bumped into the Commander over there, we'd have a problem. So let's ask where that warehouse is and check it out. It's just the Captain and the bear over there, so even if they find us, we can probably talk them around."

He made it sound so easy, I found myself nodding before I could think better of it.

“But, will we really be all right...?”

“We’ll be fine! As long as we don’t run into too many people, I can stop them with a bit of magic. Come on, let’s go! We’re racing against time here! And besides...”

Tugging my hand, Eric gave me a shy smile.

“Don’t friends help each other?”

Lucia and Eric Sneak Out

Luck was with us; we found the innkeeper at the counter and were able to ask the location of the Gorgonne warehouse. After that, we found Eric's horse in the stables and led it towards the town gate. Sneaking out of the inn was a success. Once we were out of the town, we mounted the horse.

"I've never ridden with a passenger before, so this might be uncomfortable," Eric said apologetically. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine. I'll try to hang on so I don't fall off!" I told him.

"Do that," he agreed. "And I'll let the horse go slow. Now, let's go!"

Although Eric and I were almost the same height, I was ever so slightly taller. So unlike when I'd ridden with Sir Gaius or Sir Celes, this time I sat behind Eric rather than in front. My heart was in my throat at the unfamiliar arrangement, but this wasn't the time for such worries.

The two of us rode silently. Neither of us had the breath to spare for talking. Eric was keeping the pace relatively slow, but even so, hanging on took all of my attention.

"Is that it?" Eric murmured.

He'd noticed a faint light in the darkness ahead of us. When I looked, I realized that even with my unsteady field of vision from the bouncing, I could see a light flickering.

After we continued a short while, the shape of the warehouse, rather like a large mansion, appeared. It was perhaps a little smaller than the inn we were staying at in Amarith? But compared to a regular house, it was much larger.

"I don't see Celes's or Gaius's horses," Eric commented. "Wonder if they hid them."

"Should we hide ours?" I asked.

“Yeah. Though that means we’ll have to walk a bit — you okay with that?”

“I am *very* good at walking,” I assured him.

To avoid being seen, we extinguished our magical lantern and hid the horse in the shadow of a convenient shrub. Then we softly made our way through the darkness.

“Looks like the others are already here,” Eric whispered, as we reached the warehouse.

Near the door, I could see several figures fallen on the ground. For one moment, my heart skipped a beat — but then I realized that they weren’t Sir Celes or Sir Gaius, but unfamiliar men.

“Well, the door is oh-so-conveniently open, so shall we just walk through the front door?” Eric said. I was twitching at every little thing, but he seemed to have nerves of steel. He continued onwards steadily, cool as a cucumber.

“Aren’t you scared?” I asked.

“Well, I trust my own strength,” he said. “I’m not going to lose to the sort of people a merchant house like this can hire.”

I glanced at the deep red robe he was wearing. If he was wearing that color of robe when he wasn’t even an adult yet, then Eric had to be truly powerful.

“I think I heard something over that way. Shall we check it out?”

“Yes!”

I hurried after him, following Eric’s lead as we advanced deeper into the building. If Sir Celes and Sir Gaius found us they would surely be furious, but I was worried about Miss Maria.

Although this was supposedly a warehouse, the interior was strangely complicated. Corridor after corridor branched off from the one we were following, as if deliberately designed to thwart intruders such as us.

“Who are yo—”

A door suddenly opened ahead of us and a man appeared from inside... But before I even had time to startle, and before he could even finish demanding to

know who we were, there was a sharp crackling sound and a flash of light, then the man collapsed to the floor.

Unable to understand what had just happened, I looked at Eric. Perhaps he noticed my stare. He turned around, the mischievous grin of a child who had just pulled off a prank spreading across his face.

“Ah, don’t worry, we’re good. I made sure he couldn’t move. It’s just a handy little application of lightning magic I came up with — if I focus on the body and zap them, the muscles all contract and they can’t move. Oh, and I’ve tested it a lot, so I’m sure he won’t die from it! Probably!”

I kept staring at him, too stunned to think of a response, so he followed up with, “When I tried it before, I knocked them out. This guy’s still awake, so I don’t think he’ll die.”

I could certainly understand why he’d protested so much about being left behind as a noncombatant if this was what he was capable of. He was certainly a far cry from me, demanding to go when I had no fighting skills at all. He also scared me just a bit, but I’d let that be my little secret.

“Keys, keys, where’re the keys...” Eric said in a cheerful sing-song, going through the man’s pockets. “Oh, found something! Score!” From an inner pocket, he pulled out a small keyring. He turned to me with a broad grin. “I’d say we’re doing pretty well!”

“Ah...right.” I wasn’t confident that I could smile back. It was no wonder he’d been chosen to accompany the Sacred Maiden. He was on a whole different level — both in terms of ability and in terms of guts!

“It’s too bad that he can’t talk like that,” Eric said. “I have a lot of questions I’d like to ask. Oh, Lucia, can you tie this guy up?”

I took the rope he passed me and, as suggested, used it to bind the arms of the unmoving man. While I was wrapping it around his wrists, Eric apparently got tired of waiting and lent a hand.

If it turned out that this man had nothing to do with the incident, we would owe him *such* an apology...

“Okay! Now, which way did that noise come from? If they wanted to hide

something, it's either in the back or in a hidden room. And if they're involved in selling people, they'd *definitely* want to hide it." Eric peered into the room that the man had come out of. "Huh. This looks like a parlor."

When I craned my neck to peer around him, I saw an elegantly designed set of parlor furniture, upholstered with luxurious fabrics and sitting on a thick rug. Everything, from the beautiful floral wallpaper to the curtains made to match the fabric of the sofa, was exactly as you would expect of a parlor for receiving high-class customers.

"I wonder what he was doing in there," I murmured.

"Huh. That's a good question," Eric said. "He doesn't look like he was going to get goods from the storage rooms, either."

The magical lamp next to the hearth was dark, but when I touched it, I could feel a faint warmth, so it must have been lit until very recently.

"I wonder if there's a hidden door in this room or something..."

"Seems likely!" Eric agreed eagerly. "Let's check it out. Although, it's kind of dark. Let's turn that on. Even if someone finds us, we can handle them."

"I think it would be better not to be found in the first place..."

"Oh, come on, it'll be such a bother if we don't. I hate bothersome stuff," Eric said haughtily, and flipped the switch for the magical lamp. The room immediately lit up, and I began nervously looking around, when—

"This, maybe?" Eric muttered. "Nope...I was sure the hearth looked suspicious, but maybe not? Although, there're no ashes, and it looks really suspicious..."

"...What are you two doing?" someone said behind me.

The ice in that voice went straight down my spine. I didn't even have to turn around to know: he was *furious*. So furious that it scared me.

Another familiar voice followed, "What's this? You guys follow us here or something? Good job finding this place, little guy."

"Hmph! I could have done all that before breakfast!" Eric replied

nonchalantly. I was even more impressed that he could talk so normally, faced with that voice. *Eric, do you fear anything at all!?*

“Besides! Check this out! Not bad, huh? We got the keys!” he said brightly.

“Sure, but the keys to *where?*” Sir Gaius countered.

“Who knows? But they’re the keys to something!”

“Well, yeah, that much is obvious.”

Listening to the light banter flying back and forth in front of me, I very carefully turned and peeked at the expression of the man standing behind me.

“You’re...angry. Aren’t you,” I said.

“...Not so much angry as surprised,” he admitted. “What are you doing here? We don’t even know that there’s anything to find. And you were told to *wait.*” Sir Celes muttered the last, sighing heavily.

I burst into apologies. “I’m so sorry! But I was so worried about Miss Maria!”

“I know that,” Sir Celes told me. “I’m just...surprised you were so active about it.”

Abruptly, Eric stepped between me and Sir Celes.

“Don’t be mad at Lucia!” he insisted, as if worried for me. “I’m the one who brought her here. Anyway, now you’ve got more people, so let’s start searching!”

“If we try to search with this many people, we’ll be noticed—” Sir Celes started.

“True! So let’s just bull our way through with force, Cap’n,” Sir Gaius said. “Anyone finds us, we just put them down!”

“Yeah! Exactly!”

As Sir Gaius and Eric enthusiastically agreed with each other, Sir Celes sighed again.

I’m so sorry!

Lucia Searches for a Hidden Room

“If it turns out we were wrong about this place, there’s going to be quite a ruckus!” Despite his words, Sir Gaius seemed rather cheerful.

Echoing Sir Gaius’s excitement, Eric replied, “It’ll be fine! Big companies like this one always have a skeleton or two hiding in the closet, anyway. And don’t you think this place is really suspicious?”

Those two really did seem to get along. They were bantering like old comrades, so in sync with each other that they seemed to be on the verge of forgetting where we were.

“Anyway, let’s search quickly. Before someone finds us,” Sir Celes said, apparently resigned to the situation. He began feeling around the side of the hearth.

I joined the search, turning back the heavy curtain. If anything in this room was suspect, it would have to have enough space for someone to come and go. The hearth, the bookshelf, the full-length mirror... Wait, a mirror?

“Isn’t it a little odd to have a mirror in a parlor?” I asked. Or was this something that happened a lot in rich peoples’ houses?

“There’s a wardrobe next to it, so maybe it’s so people can try on clothes or check the fabrics they’ve ordered?” Eric suggested.

That did make sense. And yet, something was still bothering me...

“But, this mirror is strangely dirty,” I noted. It was an elegant mirror well-suited to the elegant room, but for some reason the surface was covered with fingerprints. Normally, anything with a shiny surface would be polished when the room was cleaned, which made the condition of this mirror very odd indeed.

Prompted by my interest, Sir Celes and the others also gathered in front of the mirror.



“Looks like the dirt’s all right at the height where you’d push it. Think this’s it?”

When Sir Gaius reached forward to press against the most smudged section of the mirror with his large hand, there was a light click as if something had fallen into place, and the mirror slowly swung open.

“Go, Lucia!” Eric cheered. “Hey, aren’t you glad now that we came, Captain?”

Sir Celes ignored him, grabbing my arm. “Lucia, stay close to me. Master Eric, please be cautious.”

What could be past this point? I forced down my nerves, and looked at the corridor revealed behind the mirror.

Leaving Sir Gaius to stand guard, Sir Celes, Eric and I proceeded into the darkness. In no time at all, it dead-ended at a wall, but when Sir Celes stepped to the front and felt around for a moment, he discovered that the wall itself was a door, and opened it.

“Miss Maria!” I gasped.

Inside was a small, windowless room. There was a dusty rug on the floor, and lying on it was the person we had been trying so hard to find.

“So the Gorgonne Company *did* kidnap the Sacred Maiden,” I heard Eric mutter, as I dashed forward to Miss Maria’s side. Seeing the slight rise and fall of her chest, relief overwhelmed me.

She’s alive, oh thank goodness...

“Miss Maria! Miss Maria!” I shook her, trying to wake her, but she showed no signs of coming to.

Sir Celes knelt next to me. “They probably used that drug on her. I’ll carry her, Lucia. Don’t worry.”

As if he were handling something incredibly delicate, he carefully slid his arms beneath Miss Maria’s back and knees and lifted her up. Miss Maria continued to sleep, and he was right — that couldn’t be normal.

“Seems like the other two missing people aren’t here,” Eric commented.

He was right. The room wasn't very large, and only Miss Maria was here. Perhaps Gisella and Ronnie were in a different room? Hopefully they were all right...

"For now, let's leave this place. Our first priority has to be getting the Sacred Maiden back safely," Sir Celes said, starting back down the hallway.

"We're not going to look for Ronnie and Gisella!?" I asked, shocked.

"I have to take the Sacred Maiden back to His Highness first," Sir Celes told me. "Lucia, I know this is hard, but I want you and Eric to come back with me. We'll leave Sir Gaius here to look for the other two."

When he said that, maybe it was selfish, but I felt as though I had been pushed away. Sir Celes's voice wasn't sharp at all. He didn't even seem to be angry.

But, when I looked at Sir Celes holding Miss Maria, like a knight from a storybook, it seemed to drive home the difference between the world that he lived in and mine.

No, I had to stop. This wasn't the time or the place to think of such things. This still wasn't over yet. Not until Miss Maria woke up in a safe place, and Gisella and Ronnie were found safe.

Trying to control my clamoring heart, I hurried after Sir Celes.

After rejoicing at Miss Maria's safe recovery, Sir Gaius listened to our request and nodded. "Got it. Then I'll keep looking around for those two. A beautiful lady and a guy with curly brown hair, right?" He thumped a fist against his broad chest.

"You sure you're okay by yourself, bear?" Eric asked.

"What, do you not trust me!? I may not look it, but this old man's plenty strong, you know!"

"You're a bear, of course you're stronger than humans."

"Whaaaat!?"

Even through their lively back-and-forth, Miss Maria didn't wake up. Her

snow-white eyelids didn't so much as twitch. For some reason, it brought tears to my eyes.

Miss Maria would wake up, wouldn't she? She wasn't just going to sleep like this forever?

"She'll be all right. If what they gave her is the drug we heard about, then it should wear off after a full day," Sir Celes reassured me. He must have learned the details of the drug while investigating in town. "I doubt they gave her more than one dose, so we shouldn't need to worry about any side effects."

He gave me a gentle smile.



Once we'd returned to the inn and laid the still-unconscious Miss Maria in her bed, Sir Celes turned to me.

"I'm going to go report to the Commander. Will you look after her?"

"Yes, leave it to me."

"I'll go, too," Eric said. "Later, Lucia!"

Smiling at my response, Sir Celes re-fastened the cloak he'd wrapped around Miss Maria and left in the direction of the prince and Sir Agliardi's room. Eric hurried after him.

Alone with Miss Maria, I pulled up a chair next to her bed and studied her sleeping face. Noticing a smudge on her cheek, I dampened a handkerchief and scrubbed it off. Now she really did look like she was only sleeping, as if all the chaos of earlier had never happened.

"Miss Maria...I was worried about you. I'm so glad you're all right. Please wake up soon."

Of course, there was no answer from Miss Maria.

It was lonely, talking without any response. But when she woke up, surely she would show me that bright smile again. Surely she wouldn't just sleep like this forever.

"I was so worried that Eric actually took me with him to look for you," I told

her. I knew she wouldn't respond, but I kept talking. "Eric said that he'd misjudged you and he wanted to apologize. Sir Celes...he was very worried, too. You're not alone, Miss Maria. So please, wake up soon. It's lonely, not being able to talk to you. It's over now. You don't have to be scared anymore. It's safe to wake up."

As I was talking at the sleeping Miss Maria, someone knocked on the door behind me.

"Yes?"

"I've brought you a drink, miss." When I opened it, Ulisse was standing there with a pitcher of water and a cup. "They told me that when the Sacred Maiden returned, I should bring her and her attendant something to drink," he explained.

Had Sir Celes or Eric asked him, maybe? Certainly, now that my nerves were finally settling, I was rather thirsty.

"I'm sorry you had to go to the trouble," I said, accepting the cup.

"Not at all, miss. Drink up while it's chilled." Ulisse smiled at me. "It's been a busy evening, hasn't it? The Gorgonne Company, kidnapping the Sacred Maiden. Never would have thought it of them. Seems that Ronnie let them in. Apparently he's in quite a bit of trouble with His Highness now."

I blinked. "Ronnie...took Miss Maria?"

"He said the Gorgonne had taken Gisella hostage." Ulisse sighed heavily. "Seems he gave the Sacred Maiden to them in trade for her."

Ronnie had handed over Miss Maria in exchange for his sweetheart? I couldn't hide my shock. How could anyone do such a...

...Wait. What?

I looked at the man in front of me. Ulisse was scratching at his hair and smiling brightly at me, the same smile as when I'd met him when we'd gone to borrow the innkeeper's ledger.

"Mister Ulisse...how did you know that Miss Maria had been kidnapped?" I asked slowly. "That should have been kept secret."

“Huh? But you told me about it when we first met. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten, miss!”

“I did not,” I said sharply. “And how do you know so much about Ronnie’s situation? That seems very...odd...”

Just as I began questioning the smiling Ulisse, an overwhelming feeling of sleepiness suddenly came over me. At the same time, I noticed that I couldn’t feel my fingertips anymore.

“Wha...”

“Oh, so it finally kicked in? I decided you were going to be the next one from the minute I saw you, you know. And I told the truth — His Highness and the rest are busy arguing right now.” With a click, Ulisse latched the inner lock of the door as his kind-seeming smile twisted. “Now, let’s get on with this.”

I collapsed to the floor as the numbness spread through my entire body. The water cup I had been holding fell with a clatter.

“You probably can’t speak anymore. Don’t worry, you’ll fall asleep soon.” Ulisse snickered; it was an ugly sound. “That’s the nice thing with this stuff: it makes your memory fuzzy. Once I’m done, I’ll clean you up nice and pretty and you won’t remember any of this was more than a bad dream.”

Lying there unable to move, I suddenly remembered Lord Reynard’s and Sir Gaius’s words.

“A short while ago, we learned that there has been a string of attacks on vulnerable women recently, here in Amarith.”

“A woman walking alone around this town right now is practically asking for her life to be ruined!”

They hadn’t simply meant that Amarith was unsafe. They’d meant that there was a serial rapist in the town.

I glared desperately at the laughing coward of a criminal in front of me. Miss Maria was in this room. I couldn’t let him take me down. I’d promised to protect her!

Fighting desperately against the powerful urge to sleep overwhelming me, I

struggled to get my voice to work. “S...”

No, I didn’t want this to happen. Someone, help...!

TO BE CONTINUED...

Extra Story: A Knight's Work!

It was a clear, sunny afternoon. Sir Celes had suggested that we eat our lunches together when the weather was nice, so that day the two of us were sitting in a corner of the back courtyard that Sir Celes had suggested, eating lunch and chatting enthusiastically.

"But it's still chilly. Isn't the water cold?" he asked.

"Oh, it is! But I use water from the well, so it's at least warmer than getting water from a magic stone."

Sir Celes had inquired about my work, so I was explaining the washing areas that we used while I drank my hot tea.

When I did my washing outside, I would draw up water from the well and use that, but on rainy days we had to do the wash inside, so we'd get our water from a magic stone then. Once, it had been paired with a flame stone to produce hot water, but these days we only had the water stone, so we couldn't control the temperature. It would only produce cold water.

But using cold water when the weather was also cold was problematic. It was hard to get stains and dirt out of the laundry if the water was too cold. And in the winter, it wouldn't warm up if you waited, so we had to add a little hot water instead. It wouldn't do to whine, but to be honest, the process was a nuisance.

"Well water, huh?" Sir Celes mused. "Come to think of it, I have noticed that well water seems cool in the summer and warm in the winter."

"Do the knights use the well water, too?" I asked.

"Sometimes we'll sluice ourselves down with well water after training," he said. "There is a bathhouse for the knights, but we can only use it at certain times, and no one wants to crowd in with a bunch of rough-and-tumble guys, so we usually just dunk a bucket of well water over our heads and call it good."

"You too, Sir Celes?"

Sir Celes scratched at the tip of his nose, smiling sheepishly. “Um, well...yeah, sometimes,” he admitted.

Dousing yourself with well water? Wouldn't that be cold? Yes, today was relatively warm because of the sun, but this was still Nivose, the snowy month. This was the coldest part of the year! It had even snowed just a few days ago!

“Isn't that cold?” I asked.

“I guess. Really, usually we're pretty hot after the fencing and hand-to-hand training. Although in this weather, you do have to dry off quickly if you don't want to get sick.”

“What is training to be a knight like? Is it just swords and hand fighting, or do you do other things?” I asked.

Sir Celes tilted his head to the side. “Weeeeell... It's mostly swordwork, but the guys who use magic, like me, also go to the Academy to practice. And I suppose there's also the etiquette classes...”

“You learn etiquette!?” I asked in surprise. I'd thought knights only trained for fighting, but it seemed they did all sorts of things!

“Yeah. Sometimes we're assigned to guard important people and royal visitors. The First Regiment also guards the royal family, but they're all noble sons, so they're already trained in etiquette. But for the Third through Fifth Regiments, which have a lot of guys from common families like me, we do need to study it regularly.” He laughed ruefully. “It's a pain, but that's the way it is.”

He had a point. If you didn't come from a noble family, it would be hard to keep up with noble manners. Apparently being a knight was more work than I'd thought.

“So are the Second Regiment nobles?”

“Not necessarily. Only the First Regiment is restricted to noble families. But the Second Regiment is a special case. They don't just study etiquette, they study all sorts of things. Although I don't know much of the details about that, either!”

“Really?” I asked curiously.

“Yeah. The Second Regiment is special, in a different way than the First. All of their training is done completely separate from the rest of us.”

“I’d always heard that the Third and Fourth were the best of the knights.”

“That’s because the Third and Fourth Regiments are the ones that actually operate as proper regiments. The Second Regiment generally doesn’t work in the open... Um, but that’s kind of a secret, okay?” Sir Celes raised a finger in front of slightly pursed lips, asking for my silence.

Seriously. How was it fair that he could be handsome *and* cute? I didn’t think I could make that pose look so adorable, if I did it.

“I get the impression that the knights aren’t really what I thought,” I admitted. “Is the work you do like that, too?”

“Our work?”

I nodded. “Yes. What sort of things do you do? I mean, I’ve heard you’re called the Handymen because you do whatever needs doing, so what *do* you generally do, Sir Celes? If I may ask?”

In fact, I’d been wondering about that for a while, so when the conversation had turned to what the knights did, I decided to ask. The Third Regiment were called the Handymen, but what were they actually involved with?

“Me? Ah... Well, I don’t mind, but...I’m not sure it would be all that interesting?”

“It’s about you, Sir Celes. Of course I’m interested.”

“Oh! Ah...um, thanks. Let’s see...right, the work we do. Honestly, it’s not anything special. I suppose that most of it is monster hunting.”

Monster hunts... Thinking back, it was true that Jeanne and Joanne, who were in charge of the two Handymen regiments, would occasionally receive uniforms splattered with blue stains.

While I was thinking about my own work, Sir Celes had started talking about a recent monster hunt.

“A fachan came down from the Elkann Mountains,” he explained. “They’re giants, with only one eye, one arm, and one leg each. Have you ever seen one?”

Even if I'd heard a monster's name, I'd been lucky enough to never actually encounter one before, so all I knew about any monster was what I heard from other people. Naturally, I'd never seen a fachan. But...

"They're about twice the size of a grown man, but even though they only have one arm... What's wrong!?" Sir Celes spluttered, as I suddenly latched onto him, my face white.

"Are you hurt!?" I demanded. "Is everyone all right!?"

Had there been any stains bad enough that they'd asked me to use *Soap* on them recently? But, if the uniforms were too badly damaged, they'd just dispose of them, not send them to the laundrymaids. If they disposed of the uniforms, then even if someone *had* been badly hurt then I wouldn't know about it...

"Sir Celes, are you all right!?"

"I'm fine! I'm fine, so just calm down, okay?" Sir Celes held me firmly, almost embracing me, as his voice rose in surprise. That brought me back to myself, and I hastily let go of his uniform and drew back.

"I-I'm sorry," I said. My fingers were trembling; I clasped them together. No doubt my face was practically bloodless; I probably looked terrible. Feeling Sir Celes's worried gaze on me, I looked down.

"I can handle a fachan on my own," Sir Celes said. "Don't worry, my regiment is..."

"My father..."

It felt so cold all of a sudden. Like a cloud had covered the sun.

A fachan. A horrible, one-eyed giant. A terrifying monster that had taken something precious from me. Biting my lip, I stared at my clenched hands.

"A fachan killed my father."

My father had been a guardsman in Hasawes. I'd heard that he'd died from a fachan's blow, trying to buy time for his wounded comrades to escape. I only had vague memories of my father, but I remembered the way my mother had clutched at me as she fell to the ground in tears.

“Lucia...”

“I’ve heard that giants are dangerous, because they’re both strong and well-protected. They say that even if you strike them with a sword, the edge won’t penetrate.”

I was still staring at my hands when Sir Celes reached into my field of vision. Slowly, gently, he wrapped my work-roughened hands in his sword-callused ones.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up,” he said.

“No, I should apologize... But, I’m so glad you’re all right, Sir Celes. If I’d lost you, too...”

After my mother died, I hadn’t smiled for a long time. I’d been hurting, scared, *lonely*. It had taken everything I had just to hold the tears back. But then I’d come to work in the castle with Chicca and the others, finally my life had returned to normal. Then I’d met Sir Celes, and every day had been a joy.

When I heard the name fachan, though, I felt like my ordinary life was about to shatter to pieces. Like I was about to lose someone else I cared about, the same way I’d lost my mother, my father...

“Lucia...”

“But, you’re strong, Sir Celes.” I looked up, to find sky-blue eyes staring at me in concern. “You’re strong enough to defeat a fachan, right? You didn’t even get hurt, right? You won’t...disappear, right...?”

“Right. I’m... Well, I’m pretty good with a sword, so I’ll be fine. Only the genuinely strong get into the Third Regiment,” he said, as if willing confidence into me. “I’ve got some wind magic, even if it’s not all that powerful, and I’ve always been pretty lucky. I won’t get hurt. I won’t die. Don’t forget, I fought a dragon and lived to tell the tale!”

Come to think of it, the man in front of me served under the Dragonslayer himself, and he’d been a member of the expedition that had defeated the dragon in Aquilania. He had such a warm, comfortable air about him that I had forgotten, but Sir Celes was strong.

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me...” I started.

“No, I’m sorry, for bringing up such painful memories. I never wanted to make you look like that...”

Hastily, I arranged my face in a smile. At least, I hoped I’d managed a smile. I didn’t want to make him worry. I wasn’t looking for sympathy. I just wanted to smile and laugh with him.

Smiles answer smiles. Uneasy faces cause uneasy faces. The reason Sir Celes had looked so uneasy was because I had looked that way. I *had* to smile.

A fist thumped lightly on the top of my head.

“Don’t force it,” Sir Celes told me. “If you’re hurting, say something. You don’t need to worry about me. There’s nothing wrong with crying when you want to.”

“...You’re too kind, Sir Celes,” I told him staunchly.

“Only when it comes to you...” he muttered under his breath, and turned a smile as bright as the sun to me. “If you ever encounter a monster, Lucia, I’ll come to save you.”

“It’s very encouraging to hear that from a knight.”

“I’m not kidding. I’ll come save you. So stay where I can protect you, okay? If you went back to Hasawes, it would take me forever to run all the way over there.”

I laughed. “I can’t go back until I’ve paid off my debts anyways.”

Suddenly, I realized that while we’d been talking, I’d begun smiling without even thinking about it. The wind against my cheeks was cold, but my heart was warm, as if basking in sunbeams.

I hugged that warm, bubbly feeling to myself, and grinned at Sir Celes. “You really are amazing!”

“Eh?” He blinked.

“All I had to do was look at you smiling, and I cheered back up! You’re like the sun, Sir Celes. Bright and warm. Being with you makes me happy.”

Sir Celes made a startled noise as I grabbed his hands. His hands and fingers

were hard and strong, unlike mine. They were hands trained to hold a sword.

“These hands protect a lot of people,” I said. “Including me.”

It was a funny thought, but a happy one.

“Lucia, I...!” Sir Celes started — just as the bells tolled the first hour of the afternoon.



“Oh no! That’s the afternoon bell!” I yelped, interrupting whatever he was going to say. I couldn’t afford to be late for work. “I’m sorry, Sir Celes, I know you were saying something, but I have to get back to work. Tell me next time, okay?”

At my rueful words, Sir Celes smiled and shook his head. “No, it wasn’t anything important. Not...really...”

Quickly tidying up, I said, “Really? Well, please excuse me, then. I really do have to go. Good luck with your work, Sir Celes!” Waving, I set off running.

I needed to work hard, just like Sir Celes worked hard. I didn’t want to be embarrassed the next time we met!



A few days later, Jeanne commented to me that the Third Regiment’s training regimen had gotten extremely strict recently. Apparently, the captain of the Third Regiment, the Dragonslayer, had said that they were getting soft, so he was going to drill them like rookies.

Oh dear. I hoped Sir Celes was all right. His training had sounded hard enough before. If it got even harder, would he have trouble finding time to come to the back courtyard for lunch?

If only the sun would come out! I looked resentfully up at the gray, cloudy sky. If the clouds would just clear and let the blue sky show, then I would be able to meet the man with the sunny smile again. *I’ll have to reward him somehow for his hard work the next time we meet.*

Decided, I turned my eyes back to my own work in front of me.

I’m working hard too, Sir Celes! Don’t give up!



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The Extraordinary, the Ordinary, and SOAP! Volume 1

by Nao Wakasa

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